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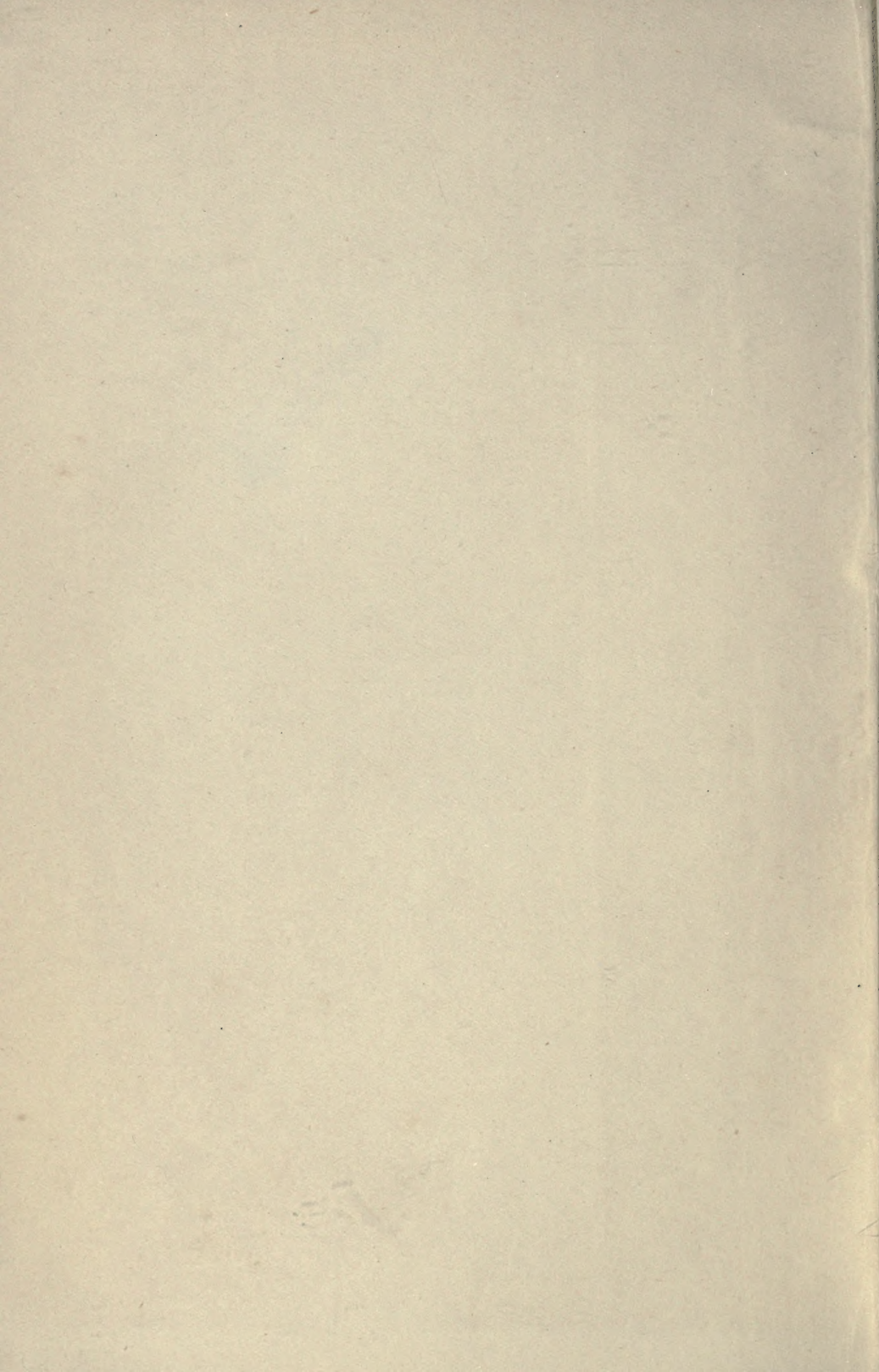


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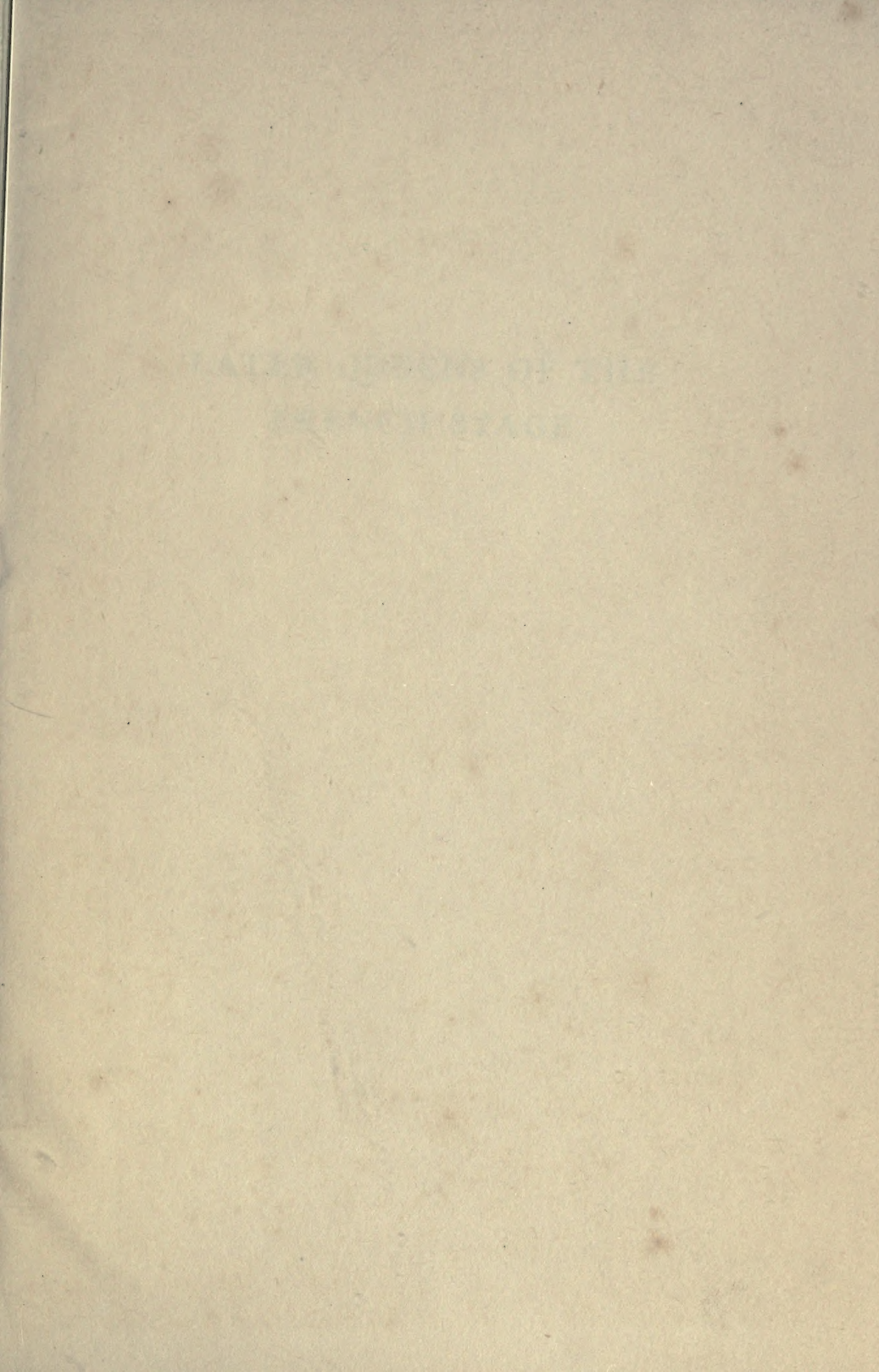
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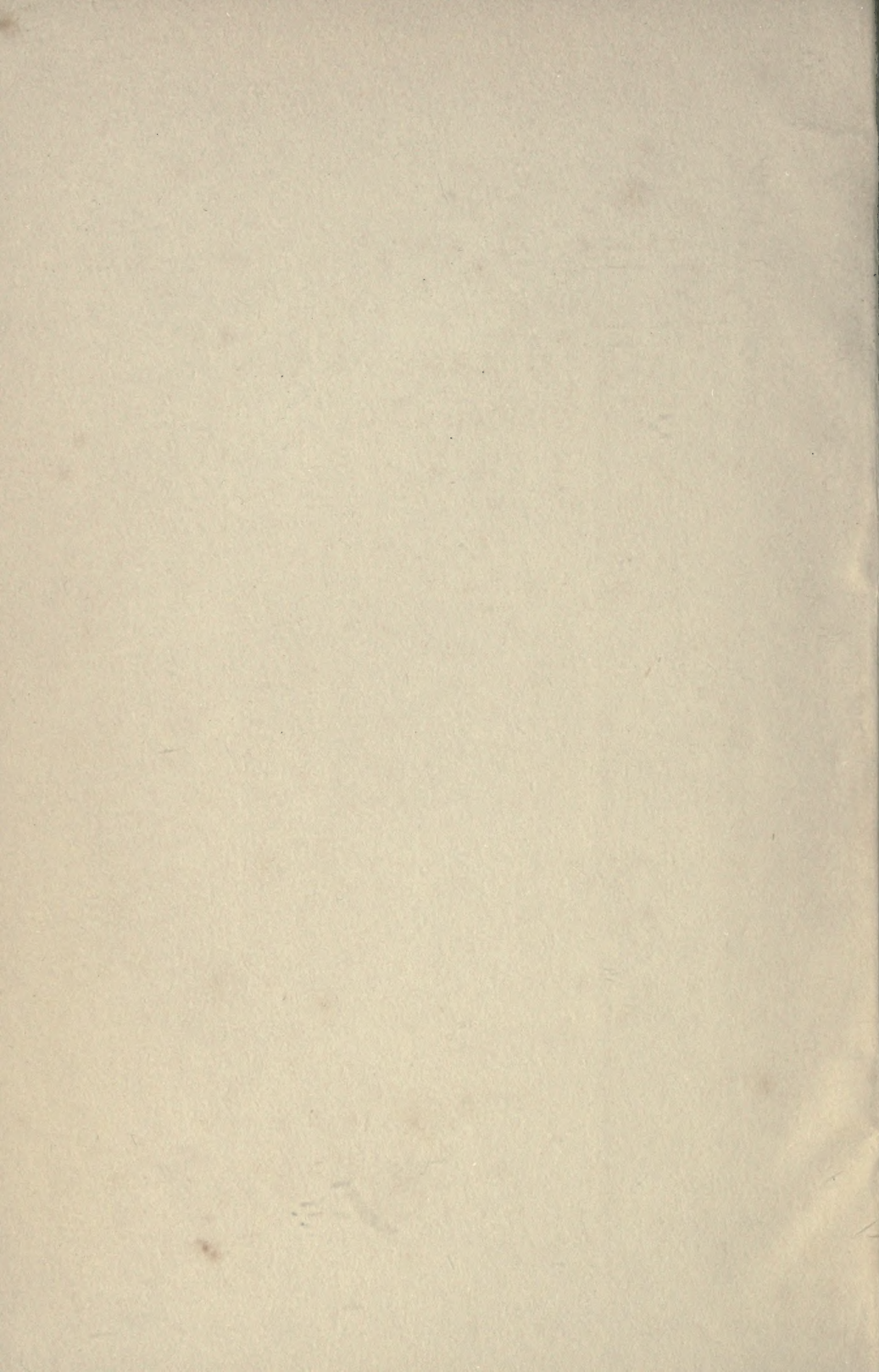















LATER QUEENS OF THE  
FRENCH STAGE





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*Art. Reprod.*

*Sophie Arnould.*  
*Painted by J. B. Greuze (Wallace Collection)*

# LATER QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE

BY

H. NOEL WILLIAMS

AUTHOR OF "QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE," "MADAME RÉCAMIER  
AND HER FRIENDS," "MADAME DE POMPADOUR," "MADAME  
DE MONTESPAN," "MADAME DU BARRY," ETC.



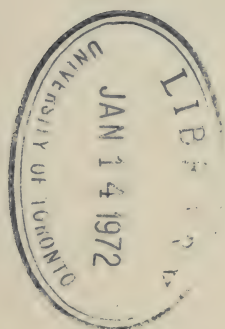
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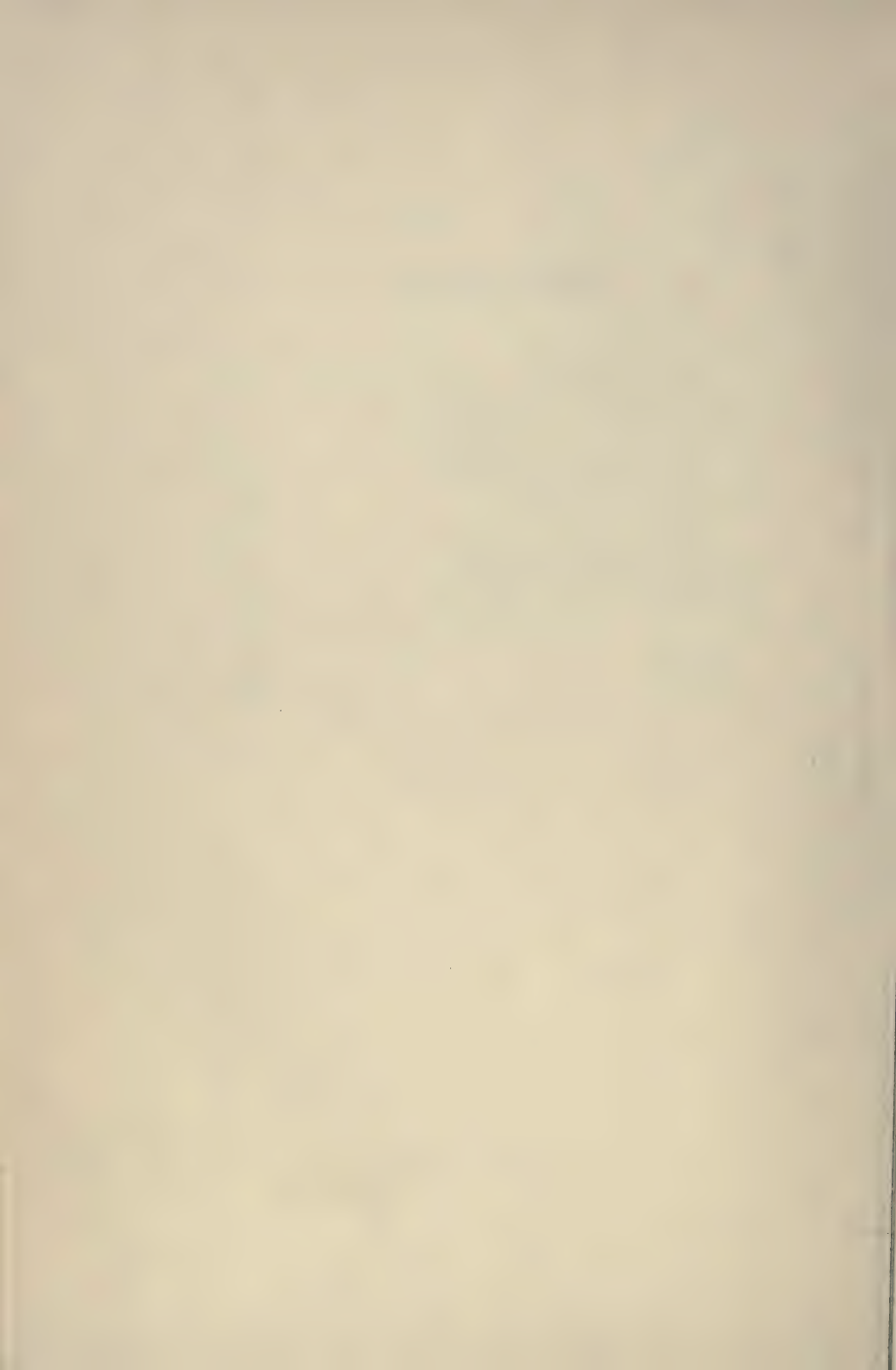




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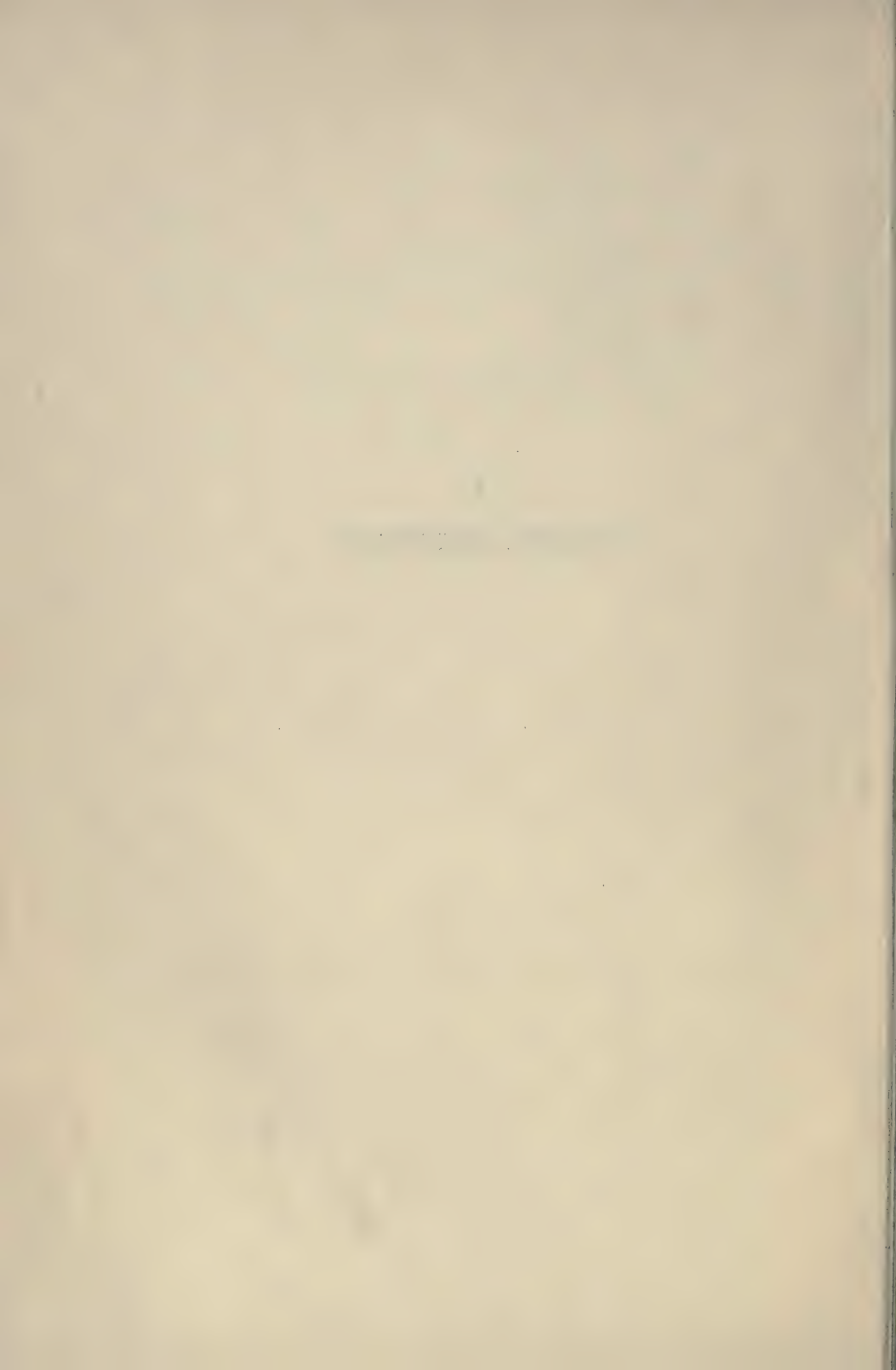




I

SOPHIE ARNOULD





# LATER QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE

## I

### SOPHIE ARNOULD

IN her unpublished *Mémoires*,<sup>1</sup> which she began, but never completed, and only a few pages of which—possibly all that she wrote—have been preserved, Sophie Arnould tells us that she was born in 1745, “in the same alcove in which Admiral Coligny had been assassinated two hundred years before.” As a matter of fact, the celebrated singer was born on February 14, 1745, and it was not until some years after her birth that her parents removed to the Hôtel de Ponthieu, Rue Béthisy, then known as the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain l’Auxerrois.<sup>2</sup>

Sophie’s parents belonged to the upper *bourgeoisie*, and at the time of her birth appear to have been in

<sup>1</sup> At the time when they wrote their monograph on the singer, Sophie’s *Mémoires* were in possession of the Goncourts; it is uncertain where they now are.

<sup>2</sup> Here is her *acte de naissance*, which also disposes of Castil-Blaze’s assertion that her real name was Anne Madeleine, and that she had adopted that of Sophie “as being more sweet and harmonious.”

“The year one thousand seven hundred and forty, 14th of February, Magdeleine Sophie, daughter of Jean Arnould, here present, and of Rose



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comfortable circumstances. Her father, Jean Arnould, was a worthy man, whose worldly ambitions were limited to securing a comfortable competence, retiring from business, and purchasing some Government or municipal office and the social distinction which went with it. Her mother, however, had received an excellent education, "which, joined to her natural intelligence," says Sophie, "rendered her in society the most amiable and interesting of women." She affected literary society and numbered among her friends and acquaintances Voltaire, Fontenelle, who, a few days before his death, called to show her the manuscript of one of the great Corneille's tragedies, Piron, the Comte de Caylus, Moncrif, the Abbé (afterwards the Cardinal) de Bernis, Diderot, and d'Alembert.

So impressed was Madame Arnould by the conversation of these celebrities, that she determined to make her little girl a prodigy of learning. Sophie's education began almost as soon as she was out of her cradle. She was precocious and learned quickly. At four, she declares, she could read; at seven she wrote better than at the time of penning her *Mémoires*, and at the same age could read music at sight without any difficulty. The infant prodigy was petted and spoiled to the top of her bent, "dressed up in silk and satin, with marcasite necklace and flowers in her hair."

When the child was four or five years old she attracted the attention of the Princess of Modena, wife of the Prince de Conti, from whom, however, she was separated.

Marguerite Laurent, his wife, born yesterday, Rue Saint-Louis in this parish, has been baptized.

"Godfather: Louis Le Vasseur, manager of the King's farms, Rue Coq-Héron, parish Saint-Eustache; godmother: Magdeleine Chevalier, spinster, Rue du Mail, of the above-mentioned parish."

Madame de Conti, lonely and bored, without husband, lover, child, or occupation, took a violent fancy to Sophie, and begged Madame Arnould to let her have the little girl to live with her. Madame Arnould consented, and Sophie became the plaything of the eccentric princess, "who dragged her about everywhere as she might have her little dog," now nursing her on her knee, now setting her down to the harpsichord, now taking her visiting in her carriage, now summoning her to her salon to amuse her guests, and anon, if she happened to be in an ill-humour, turning her out into the ante-chamber to play with the yawning lackeys.

No pains were spared with Sophie's education, and the best masters of the day were engaged to teach her all the arts and accomplishments. Before she was twelve, she could both write and speak her own language correctly—a rare accomplishment in those days outside literary circles,<sup>1</sup> and was familiar with Latin or Italian; while she could sing like a professional.

Her musical talents were not destined to remain long hidden. When the time for her first communion drew near, she was placed in the Ursuline Convent at Saint-Denis, the *supérieure* of which was a fellow townswoman and friend of Madame Arnould. Here she sang in the choir, and with such astonishing success that Court and town flocked to hear her, and Voltaire, from his retreat at Ferney, wrote to his little friend a letter congratulating her on her twofold success as a vocalist and a first communicant; an epistle which Madame Arnould, who did not share the Patriarch's views on matters of religion,

<sup>1</sup> When the Opera-house was burned down in April 1763, a lady of the Court asked Mlle. Arnould if she could give her any particulars about *CETTE terrible incendie*. "All that I can tell you, Madame," replied Sophie, "is that *incendie* is a masculine noun."



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promptly committed to the fire, although the Duc de Nivernais begged for a copy on his knees. On leaving Saint-Denis, Sophie returned to live with Madame de Conti, who, delighted by the notice which she had attracted, provided her with the most celebrated music-masters to be found in France : Balbatre gave her lessons on the harpsichord, and the famous Jéliotte—Jéliotte, the pride of the Opera !—Jéliotte, “ the happy and discreet conqueror of all the fair ladies in Paris ! ”—condescended to sing with her. Sophie proved herself worthy of her teachers.

It was then the fashion, among ladies of rank, to do penance during Lent by retiring to one of the many convents in Paris or its neighbourhood. Some of the visitors were, of course, sincerely desirous of benefiting by the services, the conversation of the nuns, and the opportunities for meditation which these peaceful abodes afforded ; but to the majority the practice would appear to have been regarded merely as a kind of rest cure. There was nothing at all austere or conventual about the life for such as these. They rose late, walked in the gardens, dined on plain but well-cooked food, received visits from their friends, attended a service or two, supped, and retired early to bed ; and if their souls did not greatly benefit, the early hours and simple fare worked wonders with their complexions. They had, too, an opportunity of listening to some very beautiful singing ; for, during Holy Week, the convents vied with one another in engaging the finest voices of the Opera to reinforce their choirs, and the services of such singers as Jéliotte, Chassé, and Mlles. Fel, Chevalier, and Anna Tonelli were always in great request.

At the beginning of Holy Week 1757, Madame de

Conti, who, as became an Italian princess, was very strict in her observance of Lent, arrived at the Abbey of Panthémont, where she found the community in a state of consternation. The convent in question had not deemed it necessary to enlist the services of any of the stars of the Opera, as it numbered among its inmates a nun with an exceptionally beautiful voice. But alas ! she had suddenly been taken ill, and it was feared that it would be impossible to replace her. Half fashionable Paris would be coming on Holy Wednesday to hear the *Tenebræ* sung, and there would be no one capable of singing it. The abbess fell upon Madame de Conti's neck and wept tears of mortification.

The princess bade her not despair, told her of the talent of her little *protégée*, and suggested that she should be sent for ; a proposal to which the grateful abbess readily consented.

Holy Wednesday came, and with it a great crowd of visitors. At the beginning of the service Sophie was a little nervous, but quickly recovered her presence of mind, and sang so divinely that her hearers were enraptured, and some, in spite of the solemnity of the place, could not refrain from applause. The following day there was not a vacant seat in the church ; while on Good Friday the doors were literally besieged, and more than two hundred carriages were turned back. Those who had succeeded in gaining admission had every reason to congratulate themselves on their good fortune, for Sophie sang the *Miserere* of Lalande, and with such exquisite pathos that there was scarcely a dry eye in the congregation.<sup>1</sup>

Paris was as delighted as if it had found a new fashion.

<sup>1</sup> E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 10.

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All the Faubourg Saint-Germain wended its way to the Hôtel de Conti to congratulate the princess upon the possession of this little wonder with her angelic voice. The Court was scarcely less interested and, finally, the Queen, the pious Marie Leczinska, who lived in a little world of her own and seldom troubled herself about what was happening in the one outside, expressed a desire to see Sophie.

“On your account,” remarked Madame de Conti to the radiant girl, “her Majesty condescends to remember my existence.” (The said Majesty did not approve of ladies who lived apart from their husbands.) Nevertheless, the Queen had to be obeyed, and so the princess, who was proud of her *protégée* and, in truth, far from displeased with so striking a tribute to her discernment, ordered her coach and set out for Versailles.

On reaching the Château, Madame de Conti and Sophie were conducted to Marie Leczinska’s apartments, where the Queen almost immediately joined them. Her Majesty smiled very graciously upon the girl, and kissed her forehead, murmuring: “She is indeed very pretty!” Then several portfolios of music were put before her, and she was bidden to choose what she would like to sing, and not to be afraid; a somewhat unnecessary exhortation, since never was there a more self-possessed young person. Sophie, quite undismayed by the presence of her royal auditor, forthwith assailed a very difficult piece, and had scarcely finished when the Queen, who was herself a musician of no mean attainments, remarked to Madame de Conti: “I should like to have her, cousin; you will give her up to me, will you not?” meaning that she wished to make her one of her Musicians of the Chamber. Afterwards refreshments



were brought in, and the Queen, having complimented the young singer and bestowed upon her a friendly pat with her fan, took her departure.

But there was another Queen of France : Madame de Pompadour, to wit, who had already expressed a wish to hear Sophie sing ; a wish which could no more be ignored than that of Marie Leczinska. On the morrow of the interview with the Queen, Madame du Hausset, the favourite's *femme de chambre*, presented herself at the Hôtel de Conti, bearing a letter from her mistress to the princess, requesting the loan of little Mlle. Arnould till the evening.

This request caused Madame de Conti considerable embarrassment. What one called then "*les grandes convenances*" forbade her to present Sophie to both the crowned and the uncrowned Queen of France. On the other hand, a refusal would mortally offend the latter, who was an extremely awkward person to offend, as a great many people, from Princes of the Blood and Ministers of State to ballad-mongers, had found to their cost. The poor lady was at a loss what to do.

Finally, she sought refuge in a compromise. Sophie should go to Versailles again, but, on this occasion, not in her patroness's company, but in that of her mother. So Madame Arnould was sent for and told to take her daughter, as from Madame de Conti, to the favourite ; and the princess congratulated herself on having emerged with credit from a very embarrassing situation.

Madame de Pompadour received her visitor very graciously, and remarked that "mother and daughter were the very picture of one another," after which, saying that the King had sent for her, and that she would return in a few minutes, she left them to them-

## 10. LATER QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE

selves. In the room in which they sat were two magnificent harpsichords, one of which had been decorated with charming pictures by Boucher. This instrument attracted Sophie's attention, and, while Madame de Pompadour was absent, she stepped up to it, ran her fingers over the keys, and began to sing. The marchioness, returning at that moment, listened entranced to the girl's singing until she had finished, when she exclaimed : " My dear child, *le bon Dieu* has made you for the theatre ; you were born, formed as one ought to be for it : you will not tremble before the public."

Then their hostess conducted them through her apartments, where Sophie appears to have been particularly struck by the favourite's sumptuous bed, with its green and gold hangings and gold fringes, raised, like a throne, upon a dais, and enclosed within a semi-circular balustrade of gold and marble, the exact counterpart, in fact, of the Queen's own couch. The marchioness begged her to sing again, and, delighted with her sweet voice, smilingly inquired who were her masters ; to change countenance, however, when she heard their names, for they were the same whom she had engaged for her idolised little daughter, Alexandrine d'Étoiles, who had died some years before.

As Sophie and her mother were taking their leave, Madame de Pompadour drew the latter aside, and said in a low voice : " If the Queen should ask for your daughter for the music of the Chamber, do not have the imprudence to consent. The King goes from time to time to these little family concerts, and, instead of giving this child to the Queen, you will have made a present of her to the King." Then she turned to Sophie, and, having examined the lines in the girl's

forehead and hand, said to her gravely : “ You will make a charming princess ! ”

A few days after these visits, Madame Arnould received a communication from the Gentlemen of the Chamber to the effect that her Majesty had deigned to admit the demoiselle Sophie Arnould into her private company of musicians and singers, at a salary of one hundred louis ; Madame Arnould received a similar appointment, at the same salary as her daughter.

Hardly had the good lady had time to master the contents of this document, when there came a second of a much less welcome nature. It was a *lettre de cachet*, informing her that by the express order of the King, the demoiselle Sophie Arnould was attached to his Majesty’s company of musicians, and, in particular, to his theatre of the Opera.

On reading this, the poor mother burst into tears. She had no objection to her daughter singing before the virtuous Marie Leczinska, but the Opera was a very different matter. No young girl could hope to preserve her virtue for long at the Académie Royale de Musique, the rules of which emancipated its members from parental control. Rather than see her child ruined, she resolved to consign her to a convent, and, accordingly, hurried off to Madame de Conti to implore her assistance.

Madame de Conti promised to do all in her power to save Sophie from the danger which threatened her, and took the girl to her friend the Abbess of Panthémont. “ I bring you,” said she, “ this young girl, of whom the Gentlemen of the Chamber wish to make an actress ; a decision which does not meet with my approval. Conceal her for me in some little corner of



your convent, until I have had an opportunity of speaking to the King."

To which the discreet abbess replied: "Princess, salvation is possible in every profession. I cannot bring myself to thwart the wishes of the King, to whom I owe my abbey. Go and see the abbesses of Saint-Antoine and Val-de-Grâce: perhaps, in this matter, they will have more courage than myself."

Madame de Conti tried Saint-Antoine and Val-de-Grâce; but at both she received the same answer as at Panthémont; and was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that further attempts in the same direction offered but very small prospect of success.

There remained, however, another way of escape: marriage. Sophie had an admirer—a devoted and, what was more to the point, an eligible admirer—a certain Chevalier de Malézieux, who asked nothing better than to give her the protection of his name. In his day, M. de Malézieux had been a noted *vainqueur de dames*, but that day, alas! was long past, and though he strove manfully to repair the ravages of time by the aid of an ingenious toilette, the only result of his efforts was to give him the appearance of a majestic ruin.

Madame de Conti had, at first, regarded this veteran dandy's attentions to her *protégée* with scant favour, and, meeting the old gentleman one day at the Arnoulds' house, charitably related for his benefit the story of a prince of her own family, who had imprudently contracted a marriage at the age of eighty, and had died the same night. Still, a day or two later, she told Sophie that she might do worse than take charge of the chevalier and his infirmities, provided that he would agree to settle his whole fortune upon her; and after the arrival

of the *lettre de cachet* from Versailles, and her abortive attempts to secure the girl's admission to a convent, actually proposed to send for M. de Malézieux, and have the marriage celebrated there and then.

Madame Arnould, however, did not altogether approve of such haste, while Sophie shed tears enough to melt the heart of the sternest parent; and the matter, therefore, remained in abeyance. Nevertheless, the chevalier, encouraged by Madame de Conti, pressed his suit with ardour, dyed his eyebrows, rouged his cheeks, "shaved twice a day," and, one fine morning, presented himself at the Arnoulds' house, bearing the draft of a marriage-contract, in which the whole of his property, amounting to some 40,000 livres a year, was settled upon Sophie.

The prospect of so advantageous a settlement in life for her daughter was a temptation greater than any self-respecting mother could be expected to resist, and though M. Arnould declined to force the girl into a marriage which was distasteful to her, his wife lost no opportunity of sounding the praises of M. de Malézieux—or rather of M. de Malézieux's income—in Sophie's reluctant ear. That young lady, however, only pouted, and when her antiquated admirer strove to soften her heart towards him by citing the example of Madame de Maintenon, who, when a young and beautiful girl, no older than Sophie herself, had espoused the crippled poet Scarron, replied, laughing: "I will make a similar marriage to-morrow, on condition that my husband will begin by being a cripple, and end by being a king."<sup>1</sup>

And so poor M. de Malézieux's contract was never

<sup>1</sup> E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 23.

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signed, and no alternative now remained for Madame Arnould but to allow Sophie to enter the Opera, trusting that, for some time to come, her services would only be required for the Concerts of Sacred Music which were given during Lent. This hope, however, was not realised, for the directors of the Opera happened to be just at that time on the look-out for some novelty to divert the attention of their patrons from the mediocrity of the pieces with which they had lately been provided, and, accordingly, on December 15, 1757, the young singer was called upon to make her first bow to the public.

It was a very modest *début*—merely the singing of an air introduced into an opera-ballet by Mouret, entitled *Les Amours des Dieux*.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, restricted as were the girl's opportunities on this occasion, she quickly became a public favourite; indeed, the eagerness to see and hear her was so great that on the evenings on which she appeared, the doors of the theatre were besieged, and Fréron sarcastically observed that "he doubted whether people would give themselves so much trouble to enter Paradise."

"Mlle. Arnould," says the *Mercure de France* of the following January, which was but the feeble echo of the enthusiasm of the public, "continues her *début* in *Les Amours des Dieux*, with great and well-deserved success. She attracts the public to such an extent that the Thursday has become the most brilliant day at the Opera, altogether effacing the Friday. The second air which she sings affords her more scope for the display of her talent than the first. She possesses at once a charming

<sup>1</sup> The song, it may be mentioned, began with the words, "*Charmant amour*," a not inappropriate omen, remarks the lady's latest biographer, Mr. Douglas, for one who was to become notorious for her gallantries.



face, a beautiful voice, and warmth of sentiment. She is full of expression and of soul. Her voice is not only tender, but passionate. In a word, she has received all the gifts of Nature, and, in order to perfect them, she receives all the resources of Art."

At the beginning of the New Year, Sophie appeared in a second piece, called *La Provençale*, in which she confirmed the favourable impression she had created in *Les Amours des Dieux*. "Mlle. Arnould," says the *Mercure*, "sang the *Provençale* with the ingenuous charm of her age. In this rôle she had only one important song. It is the monologue ('*Mer paisible*' . . .), into which she threw all the expression that it demanded. The crowded houses which have followed it up to Lent are proofs of the pleasure which she gives the public."

In the following April the young actress reaped the reward of her success by receiving her first important part, that of Venus in *Énée et Lavinie*, a tragic opera in five acts by Fontenelle, music by Dauvergne.<sup>1</sup> The confidence reposed in her was not misplaced, and she received as much applause as she had previously obtained in ariettas and pastorals. Such was her success indeed that she was speedily promoted to the principal rôle, and the admiring critic of the *Mercure*, who had already spoken in high terms of the new singer's rendering of Venus, consecrated to her the following article :

"On Tuesday, April 13, Mlle. Arnould played the

<sup>1</sup> The opera, or rather its libretto, was an old one, having been first produced so far back as 1690, with music by Colasse, a pupil of Lulli. Fontenelle, who lived to be nearly a hundred, was still alive when Dauvergne informed him of his intention to write fresh music for the opera. "Monsieur," he replied, "you do me too much honour. It is now well-nigh sixty years since that opera was first performed ; it was a failure, but I never heard that that was the fault of the composer."

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rôle of Lavinie for the first time. Her success was complete. The tragic indeed seems to be the *genre* most suited to her. It is, at any rate, that in which she has appeared to most advantage.<sup>1</sup> Her gestures are noble without arrogance and expressive without grimaces. Her acting is vivacious and animated, and yet never departs from the natural. This excellent actress has already partially corrected herself of a kind of slowness, which is only suitable to the arietta. Bad examples had led her astray. We invite her to pay heed to no one but herself, if she wishes to approach nearer and nearer to perfection."

"So great a success renders it almost needless for us to observe that Mlle. Arnould has retained this rôle; that she has brought back the public to the Opera; finally, that she has adorned *Énée et Lavinie* with an appearance of novelty."

Some months later the *Mercure* returns to the subject of *Énée et Lavinie*, and observes that Mlle. Arnould played the latter part "with that intelligence, that dignity, those natural and touching graces which enchant the public." "Happily," continues the critic, "she has depended upon her own impulses before allowing herself to be intimidated by all the little prejudices of the art. Model as a *débutante*, she reanimates the lyric stage and appears to communicate her soul to those who have the modesty and the talent to imitate her."

Towards the end of June of that year, Sophie created a trio of small parts in an opera-ballet in three acts, entitled *Les Fêtes de Paphos*.<sup>1</sup> Collé, that most exacting

<sup>1</sup> The music was by one composer, Mondonville, the choirmaster of the royal chapel at Versailles, but the three acts, which, as was not infrequently the case at this period, had little or no connection with one another, were

of critics, is very severe on this piece, but, at the same time, has nothing but praise for Sophie, who appears to have covered herself with glory. "At the first representation," he writes, "the music of this ballet was thought pitiable, and it would not have survived six, if it had not been for a young actress who made her first appearance this winter, and who, in four months, has become the queen of the theatre. Never have I seen combined in the same actress more grace, more truth of sentiment, dignity of expression, intelligence, and fire. Never have I seen grief more charmingly expressed. She can depict the deepest horror without her countenance losing one feature of its beauty. She would be twice as great an actress as Mlle. Le Maure,<sup>1</sup> if she only possessed two-thirds of her voice, and Mlle. Le Maure will always be regarded as a great artiste. I speak of Mlle. Sophie Arnould, who is not yet nineteen years old."<sup>2</sup>

The voice of Sophie Arnould was very far from being a powerful one. "Nature," she says in her *Mémoires*, "had seconded this taste [the taste for music] with a tolerably agreeable voice, weak but sonorous, though not extremely so. But it was sound and well-balanced,

by as many different pens; the first, entitled *Vénus et Adonis*, being by Collet; the second, called *Bacchus et Érigone*, by La Bruère; while the third, the title of which is not given, was believed to be the work of the Abbé de Voisenon.

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Nicole Le Maure (1704-1783). She made her *début* in 1724, in *l'Europe galante*, and at once took high rank as a singer. To an admirable voice she joined unusual talent as an actress, although she had received hardly any dramatic training. In 1743 she was imprisoned in For l'Évêque, for having refused to sing when ordered to do so, and, out of pique, quitted the stage, though she consented to reappear for a few evenings during the festivities in honour of the Dauphin's first marriage in 1745.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal et Mémoires*, ii. 147.



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so that, with a clear pronunciation and without any defect save a slight lisp, which could hardly be considered a fault, not a word of what I sang was lost, even in the most spacious buildings."

She might have added, without fear of contradiction, that her voice was infinitely sweet and that she possessed the gift of imparting to it wonderful pathos and expression. "She brought to harmony, emotion, to the song, compassion, to the play of the voice, sentiment. She charmed the ear and touched the heart. All the domain of the tender drama, all the graces of terror, were hers. She possessed the cry, and the tears, and the sigh, and the caresses of the pathetic. . . . What art, what genius, must there have been to wrest so many harmonies from a contemptible voice, a feeble throat." <sup>1</sup>

Another important factor in Sophie's success is to be found in the fact that she was not only a great singer, but an accomplished actress, which great singers rarely are. When Madame Arnould had found that she had no alternative but to allow her daughter to enter the Opera, she had, like a sensible woman, decided that, since to the Opera Sophie must go, nothing which could possibly make for her success in her profession should be neglected, and had sent her to take lessons in singing from Mlle. Fel, and in acting from Mlle. Clairon. The girl had not failed to benefit by the teaching of the famous *tragédienne*, and her command of facial expression and the dignity and grace of her movements would have reflected credit on a veteran member of the Comédie-Française, while for a *débutante* of the lyric stage they were little short of extraordinary.

And yet, with all her vocal and histrionic talents,

<sup>1</sup> E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 33.

it may be doubted whether Sophie would so speedily have attained the dazzling position in the estimation of both the public and the critics which was now hers, had she not been fortunate enough to possess physical attractions of a high order. If we are to judge of her appearance solely by her portraits by La Tour and Greuze, she must have been a very pretty woman. In the former, which the excellent engraving by Bourgeois de la Richardière has helped to popularise, Sophie is depicted at the moment when she is about to sing. Her lips are parted; her eyes, fine and full of expression, and surmounted by arched eyebrows, are turned imploringly heavenward; while her face, which is oval in shape, with small and regular features, wears a look at once charming and pathetic. In the Greuze portrait—now in the Wallace Collection at Hertford House—the actress is dressed in white, with a large black hat decorated with a white plume. Her elbow rests on a chair, her chin on the back of her hand; her expression is nonchalant and slightly *ennuyé*.

These portraits, as we have already remarked, are those of a very pretty woman; but it should be added that the pen-portraits which some of her contemporaries have left of Sophie are not altogether in accord with the crayon of La Tour or the brush of Greuze—nor yet with the description which the lady gives us of her own charms<sup>1</sup>—and we are, therefore, inclined to think that both artists have rather idealised their subject, a practice not uncommon with portrait-

<sup>1</sup> "As for my figure, truth compels me to admit that I am not tall, though I am slender and well-proportioned. I have a graceful frame, and my movements are easy. I have a well-formed leg and a pretty foot; hands and arms like a model; eyes well-set, and a frank, attractive, and intellectual face."

painters in the eighteenth century or, for that matter, in much later times. Collé and Grimm, it is true, both speak of Sophie as beautiful, though without condescending to particulars; but, on the other hand, Madame Vigée Lebrun asserts that the beauty of her face was spoiled by her mouth, while one of the inspectors of the Lieutenant of Police describes her skin as "black and dry." That curious work *L'Espion anglais* confirms the artist and the inspector: "To tell the truth, there is nothing remarkable about her; her face is long and thin; she has a villainously ugly mouth, prominent teeth, standing out from the gums, and a black and greasy skin." The writer adds, however, that she possessed "two fine eyes," a feature which also impressed Madame Lebrun, who says that they gave their owner "a piquant look," and were "indicative of the wit which had made her celebrated."

But two fine eyes, as one of her biographers very justly observes, count for much, especially when animated by the intelligence, the feeling, and the passion which belonged to Sophie; and no sooner did she appear upon the stage than a host of *soupirants* gathered about her. For some months, however, they sighed in vain. The guardian of the Golden Fleece was not more vigilant or more awe-inspiring than Madame Arnould. Every evening she escorted her daughter to the theatre, remained in her dressing-room while the mysteries of her toilette were being performed, accompanied her to the corner of the stage, and then waited in the wings until the young actress made her exit, when she again took charge of her. She seemed to have as many eyes as Argus himself. If an admirer bolder than the rest ventured to approach Sophie, before he had uttered half a dozen words down



would swoop the watchful mother, with a freezing: "*Allons ! laissez la petite en repos, s'il vous plait, Monsieur !*" before which the luckless gallant fled incontinently. If a *poulet* were despatched, it was invariably intercepted and returned to the sender, with a message which made him feel supremely foolish. "She is not a woman at all," exclaimed the indignant Duc de Fronsac, after one of these rebuffs; "she is a veritable watchdog!"

But even the most intelligent of watch-dogs cannot always discriminate between friend and foe. The danger came from a quarter whence the poor mother least expected it. She herself admitted the wolf into the sheepfold.

For some time past, matters had not gone well with the Arnoulds; M. Arnould had become involved in some disastrous speculations, which had swallowed up the greater part of his fortune, and a long and serious illness had made further inroads upon his resources. Accordingly, about the time that Sophie made her *début* at the Opera, he removed from the Rue du Louvre to the Hôtel de Lisieux, Rue Fossés-Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, and converted his new residence into an inn, where "persons from the provinces were accommodated at thirty sols a night."<sup>1</sup> To this inn there came, one fine day in the spring of 1758, a handsome young man of about five and twenty, who informed the Arnoulds that his name was Dorval, that he was an artist by profession, and that he had just arrived from Normandy, to study painting and get a play produced. M. Dorval was a model guest. He never grumbled about his food or his wine, never questioned the amount of his bills, never returned home

<sup>1</sup> Jeze, *L'État ou le tableau de Paris*, 1760, cited by E. and J. de Goncourt.

with an unsteady gait or accompanied by undesirable acquaintances, as did so many young provincials who aspired to imitate the vices of the fine gentlemen of the capital. And then he was so ingenuous, so friendly, and had such charming manners. He knew nothing of the ways of Paris, he said, but, *morbleu !* he had heard that it was a terribly wicked place and full of snares and pitfalls for unwary youth. Would M. Arnould do him the favour of taking care of his purse ? Would Madame have the complaisance to do the same for his lace ? Ah ! it was indeed a fortunate hour which had led him to the Hôtel de Lisieux !

The good people might have thought it a little singular that a young man with so well-filled a purse and such fine lace should have selected so unpretentious a hostelry as theirs for a lengthy stay ; also that, although he never looked askance at the menus of the Hôtel de Lisieux, he was constantly receiving hampers containing fish, game, truffles, and choice wines, which, he said, came from his fond parents in Normandy, and begged his hosts and their daughter to share with him. But M. Dorval quite disarmed suspicion—if any existed—by reading the letters he received from home to the sympathetic Madame Arnould, and, besides, innkeepers have more important matters requiring their attention than the investigation of the private affairs of their guests, particularly those who give no trouble, pay regularly, and are so agreeable and open-handed as was this young Norman.

M. Dorval overwhelmed Madame Arnould with attention ; he had literary tastes, and recognised in her a kindred soul. To Sophie he was also attentive, though not more so than good-breeding required. In a short time he had become quite a friend of the family,

dining and supping with them, escorting the ladies to the Opera and home again at the conclusion of the performance, and spending the rest of the evening in their company. One night, after playing a couple of games of backgammon with M. Arnould, Dorval pleaded an insupportable headache and retired to his modest apartment. Soon afterwards a man in a lackey's livery entered the house by means of a false key, knocked at his door, and informed him that all was ready. Dorval emerged from his room, and was joined by Sophie. The pair crept noiselessly down the stairs, across the courtyard and into the street, at the corner of which a coach was awaiting them. Dorval helped the girl in and took his seat beside her; the driver cracked his whip; the coach rolled away. Sophie was carried off!

Terrible was the consternation at the Hôtel de Lisieux the following morning. Madame Arnould was like one distraught; M. Arnould, who had not yet fully recovered from his recent illness, had a serious relapse. As for the Chevalier de Malézieux, when the news was communicated to him he took to his bed and never left it again, dying of grief—or, perhaps, of wounded vanity. In Paris, nothing else was talked of but the elopement of the queen of the Opera, and many were the wagers made about the identity of the fortunate individual who had borne away the coveted prize. All uncertainty was soon at an end. Two days later a letter was brought to the Hôtel de Lisieux, signed Louis, Comte de Brancas-Lauraguais, in which the writer offered his apologies to M. and Madame Arnould for the deception he had been obliged to practise upon them, and concluded by a formal promise to espouse their daughter—if he should ever become a widower!



Madame Arnould dried her tears; M. Arnould's illness took a favourable turn. Since Sophie had been carried off, it was at least some consolation to learn that her abductor was a man of rank and wealth, and not a mere middle-class libertine; one, too, who, without doubt, was only prevented from giving his name and all that went with it to the object of his affection by the unfortunate circumstance that he was already provided with a wife. The worthy pair quite forgot their disgrace as they thought of the brilliant future which awaited their daughter, when the earth should have closed over poor, delicate Madame de Lauraguais—she lived till 1793, and her career was ended by the guillotine—and the count's father, the old Duc de Lauraguais, should have gone the way of all flesh. Why, if the Fates were kind, ere many months had passed Sophie might be a countess—nay, a duchess! And so when, in due course, the prodigal daughter came, in a magnificent coach, to pay a visit of courtesy to her parents, she found, instead of tears and reproaches, caresses and pardon. Such was the moral code of the year of grace 1758!

Louis Léon Félicité de Brancas, Comte de Lauraguais, the first lover of Sophie Arnould, was a singular creature. "He has all possible talents and all possible eccentricities," wrote Voltaire, while Collé describes him as "the most serious fool in the kingdom." His conceit was stupendous, his extravagance unbounded, his energy and versatility truly astonishing; he dabbled in everything and confidently believed that he excelled in whatever he might choose to undertake. Now he was composing tragedies intended to eclipse the masterpieces of Corneille and Racine; now making experiments in

chemistry or anatomy which were to completely revolutionise those sciences; anon writing treatises in favour of inoculation, or endeavouring to bring about reforms in the theatre,<sup>1</sup> or riding in horse-races.<sup>2</sup> The violence with which he advocated his own views and his unsparing denunciations of all who ventured to differ from him, no matter how highly placed they might be, were perpetually bringing him into collision with the authorities, and he was several times exiled or imprisoned, only to resume his eccentric career the moment his punishment was at an end. The stories about him are numberless.

On one occasion he wrote a comedy, entitled *La Cour du Roi Pétaud*, and coaxed his unsuspecting father to persuade the Comte de Saint-Florentin, the Minister of the King's Household, to direct the Comédie-Italienne to produce it. The order was on the point of being

<sup>1</sup> The Comédie-Française owed to him an improvement, the importance of which can hardly be over-estimated. He it was who first proposed the abolition of the custom of allowing the *gens à la mode* to occupy seats upon the stage itself, a custom which not only interfered with the movements of the actors, but was utterly destructive of all scenic illusion. The reconstruction of the auditorium which this change rendered necessary occupied nearly two months, and cost 40,000 livres, towards which the count himself subscribed 12,000 livres.

<sup>2</sup> Lauraguais, who affected Anglomania among his other eccentricities, may be said to have introduced horse-racing into France. The first race was run on February 28, 1766, on the Plaine de Sablons, at Neuilly. It was a match between Lauraguais and Lord Forbes, the former riding his own horse, and was witnessed by an immense crowd, which had the mortification of seeing the French champion vanquished. The contest led to a great deal of unpleasantness, for, a few days later, the count's horse died, and the surgeons whom the disconsolate owner called in to dissect it declared that the animal had been poisoned. The English visitors were, of course, suspected, and so great was the outcry against them that another match, which had been arranged between the Prince of Nassau and Mr. Forth, was forbidden by the King.

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sent, when one of Saint-Florentin's secretaries, happening to glance through the play, discovered, to his horror, that it was nothing less than a clever and biting satire on certain idiosyncrasies of his Most Christian Majesty Louis XV. himself, which, had it been represented, would most certainly have entailed banishment or the Bastille on all concerned in its production.<sup>1</sup>

On another, he appeared, at four o'clock in the morning, at the lodging of two poor but talented young chemists, hustled them into a coach which was in waiting, and carried them off to Sèvres, where he had a little house, in which he was in the habit of conducting his chemical experiments. Leading his companions to the laboratory, he addressed them as follows: "Messieurs, I wish you to make certain experiments; you will not leave this house until they are completed. Adieu; I shall return a week hence; you will find here everything you require; the servants have orders to attend to your wants; set to work." So saying, he locked them in and went

<sup>1</sup> Collé, *Journal et Mémoires*, iii. 47 *et seq.* Collé declares that there was a scene in this play worthy of Molière himself. King Pétaud appears dressed as a cook, with a white cap on his head and a knife by his side. He has just made some *pâtés*, which he hands round to his obsequious courtiers, who pronounce them divine, delicious, inimitable, and so forth. One grey-haired old gentleman however refrains from joining in the general chorus of admiration, and when the King, piqued by his indifference, inquires the reason, replies: "Pardon me, Sire; the *pâtés* are indeed excellent. But, if your Majesty will permit me to speak without flattery, I would venture to observe that the woodcock-pie which you made the day before yesterday appeared to me infinitely superior to them." Thereupon the King's brow clears, and, clapping the astute old man on the shoulder, he exclaims: "That is right; I always like people to tell me the truth." Louis XV., as every one knows, was very fond of preparing dishes with his own royal hands, and decidedly vain of his culinary skill, and no one with any acquaintance with the Court could possibly have missed the point of the satire.



away. When he returned, the young chemists communicated to him the result of their labours, a discovery of some little importance, upon which he offered them a sum of money if they would agree to surrender to him the credit of having made it. "You," said he, "have genius, and you want money. I have money, and I want genius. Let us strike a bargain. You shall have clothes to wear, and the glory shall be mine." The young chemists consented, and Lauraguais went about boasting everywhere of the discovery he had made; and such, says Diderot, who tells the story, was his conceit that he soon succeeded in persuading himself that it was he to whom the credit really belonged, and that the young men had done nothing, except render him some merely mechanical assistance.<sup>1</sup>

A third story of this extraordinary man is even more amusing than the preceding one. He appears to have had a theory that it would be possible for a person to support life entirely on a diet of forced fruit, provided that they were kept in the same temperature as was required for the production of what they consumed. He, therefore, persuaded one of his mistresses to allow herself to be shut up in a green-house and fed upon grapes, pine-apples, and so forth. This regimen, as may be supposed, did not agree with the lady, who soon declared that she was starving. "Ungrateful girl!" exclaimed the disgusted count. "Can you complain of not having sufficient to eat—a trivial matter at best—while you are thus abundantly supplied with the luxuries that every one longs for?"

So eccentric a character as Lauraguais was hardly calculated to make any woman happy, whether wife

<sup>1</sup> Diderot, *Mémoires et Correspondance*, ii. 62.

or mistress, and Sophie declared long afterwards that the count "had given her two million kisses and caused her to shed four million tears." Nevertheless, the *liaison* was a tolerably long one, and, for the first three years, in the course of which the actress presented her lover with two children, we are assured that they were a most affectionate couple. By the police-reports of the time, Sophie is represented as an extravagant, grasping and avaricious woman, who cared for the count only so long as he was able and willing to gratify her innumerable caprices. Extravagant she no doubt was, but in regard to the other and graver charge, she would appear to have been maligned, that is to say, if we are to place any reliance in the following anecdote related by Diderot :

"For some days past a rumour has been current that Mlle. Arnould is dead, but it requires confirmation. In the meanwhile, the Abbé Raynal has made me her funeral oration, by relating to me some fragments of a conversation which passed between her and Madame Portail [the wife of a president of the Parliament of Paris], in which, it appears, the latter played the part of a wanton, and the little actress that of an honest woman :

" 'Is it possible, Mademoiselle, that you have no diamonds ?'

" 'No, Madame, nor do I think them necessary for a little *bourgeoise* of the Rue du Four.'

" 'Then, I presume, you have an allowance ?'

" 'An allowance ! Why should I have that, Madame ? M. de Lauraguais has a wife, children, a position to maintain, and I do not see that I could honourably accept the smallest part of a fortune which legitimately belongs to others.'

“ ‘ Oh, *par ma foi* ! If I were in your place, I should leave him.’

“ ‘ That may be, but he likes me, and I like him. It may have been imprudent to take him, but, since I have done so, I shall keep him.’

“ I do not recollect the remainder of the conversation, but I have an idea that it was as dishonourable on the part of the president’s wife as honourable on the part of the actress.”<sup>1</sup>

If Lauraguais really was so generous a protector at the police-reports and those writers who accept them would have us believe, it is certainly rather surprising to find on November 13, 1759, when the count’s passion for his mistress was undoubtedly at a very high temperature, the sieur Jean Baptiste Delamarre, tipstaff to the Châtelet de Paris, acting on behalf of the sieur Jean Baptiste Desper, perruquier, requiring the attendance of a commissary of police to witness an execution upon the goods of the demoiselle Madeleine Sophie Arnould, residing on the first floor of a house in the Rue de Richelieu. The said demoiselle, it appeared, had, twelve months before, taken the apartment in question, on a lease for three, six, or nine years, at an annual rental of 2400 livres ; but the perruquier had not as yet seen any part of that sum. The goods seized were left in the charge of one Chevalier, fruiterer of the Rue Traversière, parish of Saint-Roch, from whom, we may presume, Sophie or Lauraguais subsequently redeemed them.<sup>2</sup>

After her elopement with the Comte de Lauraguais,

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires et Correspondance*, ii. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Campardon, *Académie Royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* : Article, “ Arnould.”



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Sophie became more than ever the idol of the public, and, for the next few years, might without exaggeration have parodied the famous *mot* of *le Grand Monarque* and exclaimed: "*L'Opéra, c'est moi !*" Never, declared both public and critics, had the heroines of lyrical tragedy: the Psychés, the Proserpines, the Thisbés, the Iphises, and the Cléopâtres, found so worthy a representative, and, no matter how insipid the opera which related the story of their woes might happen to be, the young singer was always sure of an enthusiastic reception. The patrons of the Palais-Royal seemed indeed as if they could not have enough of her; the directors, who owed to her popularity their increased receipts, were at her feet; every one adored her, or pretended to do so, and every one trembled before her epigrams.

For side by side with her reputation as a singer and actress, Sophie was building up another reputation, and one which was to endure long after her stage triumphs had been forgotten: that of a *diseur de bons mots*, and of *bons mots* of a peculiarly caustic kind. Few indeed were the wits of her time—and they were plentiful enough in the eighteenth century—who cared to cross swords with her, and such was the dread which her sharp tongue inspired that people imagined they detected a sarcasm lurking even in her most innocent remark, as the following incident will show.

It was the custom of the Royal Family of France to dine in public (*au grand couvert*) on certain days of the week, and any respectably dressed person was permitted to view his Most Christian King partaking of his soup or his venison. In the days of Louis XIV., who, if his sister-in-law, the Princess Palatine, is to be believed, was in the habit of disposing at a single meal of as much

as would suffice an ordinary person for at least three,<sup>1</sup> a dinner *au grand couvert* must have been a spectacle worth going a long way to see; but as "the Well-Beloved" had no pretensions to emulate the gastronomic feats of his predecessor, the ceremony was now shorn of much of its former interest. Sophie, who had never yet enjoyed a near view of her sovereign, expressed one day a desire to attend one of these dinners, and a noble admirer, accordingly, conducted her to Versailles and into the Salon de Grand Couvert, where he placed her exactly opposite the King. His Majesty was in the act of raising his glass to his lips when he caught her eye. At the same moment Sophie remarked, half-involuntarily, to her companion: "The King drinks!" Louis, who had heard much of the young lady's biting wit, was apparently under the impression that these simple words were intended as a covert jest at his expense, and became so embarrassed that every one present noticed it. Finally, he motioned to Sophie to withdraw, which she did, reflecting that a reputation as a wit sometimes has its drawbacks.

To appreciate the witticisms of Sophie Arnould as they deserve, they must be read in the language in which they were uttered, for, when translated, the point of many of them—plays upon names and so forth—is lost. Not a few, too, of her most pungent sayings will scarcely bear reproduction in a modern work, for her wit was essentially the wit of the *coulisses*, whose frequenters were seldom at any pains to curb their tongues, even

<sup>1</sup> Here, according to that princess, was one of *le Grand Monarque's* feats in gastronomy: "Four platefuls of different soups, a whole pheasant, a partridge, a plateful of salad, mutton hashed with garlic, two good-sized slices of ham, and afterwards fruit and sweetmeats."

in the presence of the highest in the land. Fortunately, however, there still remain a considerable number of *mots* which may be rendered into English with tolerable fidelity and without injuring the susceptibilities of even the most fastidious of readers.

Sophie was an inveterate punster, a form of wit more appreciated in the eighteenth century than it is to-day. Here is one, however, which most of us will find it hard not to forgive.

The Duc de Bouillon became so enamoured of the charms of a young singer named Mlle. Laguerre that, in the course of three months, he was reported to have squandered upon her no less a sum than 800,000 livres. This prodigality greatly exasperated the creditors of the duke, who complained to the King himself, with the result that the infatuated nobleman received orders to retire to his country-seat. A few days later, some one, meeting Sophie, happened to inquire after the health of Mlle. Laguerre. "I do not know how she is at present," was the reply; "but for the last month the poor child has been living entirely on soup (*bouillon*)."

This same Mlle. Laguerre created the principal rôle in Piccini's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, produced on January 22, 1781. At the first performance she sang admirably and contributed largely to the enthusiastic reception it received; but on the second evening her efforts were but too obviously inspired by wine. "*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Sophie. "This is not Iphigenia in Tauris; it is Iphigenia in Champagne!"

Mlle. Laguerre was only one among many of Sophie's colleagues to suffer from the sharpness of that lady's tongue. She was particularly severe upon the famous *danseuse* Mlle. Guimard, the subject of our next sketch,



whose many wealthy conquests would appear to have excited her jealousy. Mlle. Guimard, though the very embodiment of grace and elegance upon the stage, was slender almost to attenuation, and Sophie dubbed her "*la squelette des Grâces*." Seeing her one evening performing a *pas de trois* with two male dancers, she declared that it put her in mind of a couple of dogs quarrelling over a bone. On another occasion, when the *danseuse's* well-known *liaison* with Jarente, Bishop of Orléans, the holder of the *feuille* of benefices, happened to be the subject of conversation, she remarked: "I cannot conceive why that little silk-worm is so thin; she lives upon such a good leaf (*feuille*)."

Another butt of her sarcasm was Mlle. Beaumesnil, who, after gallantries innumerable, married a singer of the Opera, named Belcourt. By that time her charms were on the wane, and, making a virtue of necessity, she became a model wife. One day, some one speaking of her early career, observed that she had then been like a weather-cock, veering round to a new lover every day. "Just so," answered Sophie, "and very like a weather-cock in this also, that she did not become fixed till she was rusty."

But Sophie was very far from confining her witticism to her comrades of the Opera; no one was safe from her shafts. When the intriguing old Duc de la Vauguyon, the Dauphin's governor, who had done his best to sow dissension between that prince and Marie Antoinette, died, he was regretted by no one. The day after his death, the opera of *Castor et Pollux* was played. In this piece there was a ballet of devils, which on this particular evening went all wrong, whereupon Sophie observed that the devils were so much upset by M. de

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la Vauguyon's arrival among them that their heads were turned.

M. de Boynes, who succeeded the Duc de Choiseul-Praslin as Minister of Marine, in 1670, was an honest and well-meaning man, but entirely ignorant of the duties of that important post. One evening he appeared at the Opera, where the scene on the stage represented a ship on a stormy sea. "Oh, how fortunate!" exclaimed Sophie. "He has come here to get some idea of the Navy."

Better perhaps was her remark about the Abbé Terrai, the detested Comptroller-General of Finance, whose expedients for raising money excited so much indignation in the last years of Louis XV. The abbé, who suffered from a defective circulation, was seen, one bitter winter's day, with his hands hidden in a huge muff. "What need has he of a muff?" asked the actress. "Are not his hands always in our pockets?"

The Ministers, indeed, seem to have been very favourite objects of Sophie's sarcasm. On being shown a snuff-box, with the head of the Duc de Choiseul on one side, and that of Sully, the great Minister of Henri IV. on the other, she exclaimed: "*Tiens!* they have put the receipts and the expenses together."

The *liaison* between Sophie and the Comte de Lauraguais was, as might be expected, from the singular character of the latter, not untroubled by storms. The count, though honestly attached to his mistress, was jealous, suspicious, headstrong, and passionate, always full of some new and frequently wild project or other, with which he expected her to sympathise, while the slightest opposition to his wishes was sufficient to throw

him into such paroxysms of rage that it was dangerous to approach him.<sup>1</sup> At times, he led poor Sophie a terrible life, and over and over again she was on the point of leaving him. At last, in the autumn of 1761, after their irregular union had lasted about three years, it came temporarily to a close.

Lauraguais had written a tragedy on the not very novel subject of Iphigenia in Tauris.<sup>2</sup> He had dedicated it to Voltaire, and, so soon as it was completed, set out for Ferney, to read it to the Patriarch. It would appear that, for some time past, the count's vagaries had been more than usually difficult to endure—possibly the labours of composition had not been without their effect upon his temper. Any way, Sophie resolved to profit by this moment of liberty, and no sooner had her tyrannical lover left Paris, than she ordered her coach—a present

<sup>1</sup> Some writers declare that, in his passions, he would destroy everything breakable within his reach ; others, that he went so far as to strike and even, occasionally, to *bite* the unfortunate Sophie.

<sup>2</sup> He had previously written a *Clytemnestre*, which Diderot, having had the privilege of hearing the author read it, tells us contained some very fine verses, the work, however, not of the count, but of a “ghost” in his employ, named Clinchant. This play Lauraguais endeavoured to prevail upon the Comédie-Française to produce. The actors found themselves in a somewhat embarrassing position, as the count had just subscribed the 12,000 livres already mentioned towards the alterations in the theatre necessitated by the removal of the seats on the stage, and, from motives of gratitude, they did not like to refuse. On the other hand, the tragedy was so utterly opposed to all the canons of dramatic art that to produce it would be to court not only failure but ridicule. Eventually, however, they persuaded him to withdraw his offer. Notwithstanding its rejection by the Comédie-Française, Lauraguais thought so highly of his *Clytemnestre* that he caused it to be printed, and sent a copy to Voltaire, who wrote back that his own *Oreste* was but “*une plate machine*,” in comparison with M. le Comte's superb masterpiece. The noble author, says Diderot, took the poet quite seriously, and his delight and pride knew no bounds.



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from the absent Lauraguais—threw into it pell-mell everything portable that she had ever received from him : jewellery, plate, lace, porcelain, and so forth, placed the two children whom she had borne him on the top, and despatched the whole cargo to the Hôtel de Lauraguais, Rue de Lille, with a note for Madame de Lauraguais, in which she stated that “having resolved to recover her freedom, she did not wish to retain anything which might serve to remind her of her unhappy love-affair.”<sup>1</sup> Madame de Lauraguais, who was a good and long-suffering woman, accepted the children, “regretting very much that they were not her own,” but sent back the coach and the rest of its contents.

At the same time, Sophie wrote to Ferney the following letter :

“*Monsieur, mon cher ami*,—You have written a very fine tragedy, so fine that I can no more understand it than your other proceedings. You have gone to Geneva, to receive a crown of the laurels of Parnassus from the hands of M. de Voltaire, leaving me alone and abandoned to myself. I profit by my liberty, that liberty so precious to philosophers, to leave you. Do not take it ill that I am weary of living with a madman who dissected his

<sup>1</sup> Diderot, *Correspondance et Mémoires*, ii. 69. Diderot, who had a high opinion of Sophie and was also a friend of Lauraguais, was much distressed by her conduct. Under date October 7, 1761, he writes to Mlle. Voland : “This affair displeases me more than I can tell you. This girl had two children by him (Lauraguais) ; he was the man of her choice ; there had been no constraint, no self-interest, none of those things which go to make ordinary engagements. If ever there was a sacrament, this was one ; so much the more so, since it is not in the nature of a man to espouse only one woman. She forgets that she is married. She forgets that she is a mother. It is not only a lover ; it is the father of her children whom she is leaving. Mlle. Arnould is something more in my eyes than a little baggage.”

coachman, and who wished to act as my *accoucheur*, with the intention of dissecting me also. Allow me, therefore, to remove myself out of reach of your philosophic bistoury."<sup>1</sup>

When the Comte de Lauraguais received the foregoing epistle he was so overcome that he clutched his valet by the shoulder, exclaiming: "Support me, Fabien; this blow is more than I can bear!" Then, bidding a hasty adieu to Voltaire, he posted off to Paris and tried, by promises, threats, and every means he could think of, to induce his mistress to return to him. All his efforts were, however, fruitless, and soon afterwards Sophie placed the *comble* upon his misery by "coming to an arrangement" with M. Bertin, a wealthy financier.<sup>2</sup>

The gallantry of the eighteenth century, it should be understood, had its etiquette, which was strictly observed by all who wished to be thought men of honour. Before even approaching Sophie on the matter, M. Bertin wrote to the Comte de Lauraguais, to inform him that, having been given to understand that all was at end between the count and Mlle. Arnould, he proposed to take the lady in question under his protection, if she were willing to honour him by accepting it. Sophie

<sup>1</sup> Favart, *Mémoires et Correspondance*, i. 195. Several writers refuse to accept this letter as genuine, believing that Favart invented it. It must be admitted, however, that its dry humour is very characteristic of Sophie.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Sutherland Edwards, in his "Idols of the French Stage" (vol. i. p. 181), falls into a singular error. He states that, on his return to Paris, Lauraguais found that Sophie "had placed herself under the protection of M. de Saint-Florentin, for whom, however, she had no affection." Sophie did certainly place herself under the protection of Saint-Florentin; but it was not his private but his official protection, as Minister for Paris and Chief of the Police; a not altogether unnecessary precaution, since Lauraguais had threatened to poison her.

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consented, on certain conditions; Lauraguais sorrowfully withdrew, and M. Bertin gave a supper-party, at which he formally presented Mlle. Arnould to his friends.

M. Bertin was not only rich and generous, but easy-going, good-tempered, and practical; in fact, the very antithesis of his erratic predecessor. He had lately been cruelly deceived by Mlle. Hus, a star of the Comédie-Française, his admiration for whom is said to have cost him something like a million livres, and his heart positively yearned for sympathy and affection. But alas! Sophie had none to give him. It was in vain that he paid her debts; that he provided a handsome dowry for one of her sisters; that he commissioned a celebrated coachbuilder of the singular name of Antechrist to construct for her an equipage which was the envy and admiration of all the ladies in Paris; that he loaded her with diamonds. The actress soon decided that poor M. Bertin was dull, wearisome, altogether insupportable, and began to look about for fresh conquests.

She had not far to look. So soon as it was known that the adorable Mlle. Arnould was no longer inaccessible, all the admirers whom the jealous transports of Lauraguais had kept at a respectful distance flocked around her, and Sophie, having broken with the man who had possessed her heart, threw scruples to the winds, and bestowed her favours upon several gallants, varying in social position—or, at least, so M. de Sartines's inspectors reported—from the Prince de Conti to a handsome young *friseur*, who called daily to dress the lady's hair.

But, in spite of these "*passades*" and the lavish generosity wherewith her titular protector sought to gain her affections, love for Lauraguais still smouldered



in Sophie's breast, and, at the beginning of the following year, only a few days after the enamoured M. Bertin had bestowed upon her the sum of 12,000 livres, by way of a New Year's gift, all Paris was astonished to hear that she had thrown over the financier and returned to the count.

At first, the public was inclined to applaud what it was pleased to consider the rare disinterestedness of the lady in preferring a comparatively poor admirer to an exceptionally wealthy one. But when it became known that poor Bertin's brief reign had cost him over 100,000 livres, exclusive of the New Year's gift mentioned above, it veered round, and Bachaumont reports that the general impression was that the financier had been very hardly treated. He himself expresses the opinion that the favoured lover was in honour bound to indemnify the abandoned one for the very large sums he had expended on the capricious Sophie, and that, as this had not been done, Mlle. Arnould must be held to have gained the affection of tender and susceptible hearts on false pretences, and must therefore—morally at least—"be relegated to the crowd of women from whom she had been drawn."<sup>1</sup>

It is only fair to Lauraguais to say that, very soon after this was written, he gave the lie to the rumour that Sophie's *liaison* with Bertin had been nothing but an ingenious speculation on the part of that lady, by refunding to his discomfited rival all that he had disbursed on her behalf, so that, in the end, the financier "lost nothing except the most charming woman in Paris."

The second stage of the *liaison* between Sophie and

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets de la République des Lettres.*

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Lauraguais was not less stormy than the first ; in fact, it might quite as appropriately be called a renewal of hostilities as a renewal of love. A week or two of bliss, and then their quarrels recommenced, more frequent and more violent than before. After what had passed, the count felt that he had the right to be suspicious, and he took the fullest advantage of it. Almost every day there were angry accusations, indignant denials, bitter reproaches, and floods of tears, followed by apologies, vows of amendment, and reconciliation. Never was there a more singular pair of lovers. They seem to have been perpetually separating and coming together again, for, though life with one another was intolerable, they were even more unhappy apart ; while if any misfortune happened to befall either of them, however strained their relations at the time might be, all grievances were straightway forgotten. An instance of this occurred towards the end of the following year.

The practice of inoculation for the small-pox, which had been introduced into England by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu early in the eighteenth century, had hitherto made but little progress in France, notwithstanding the fact that it had had several distinguished advocates, including Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Towards the year 1763, however, a strong movement in its favour took place, in consequence of which the Parliament of Paris, on the requisition of the Advocate-General, Joly de Fleury, passed a decree prohibiting inoculation until the Faculties of Medicine and Theology should have pronounced a definite opinion on the subject.

The decree roused the indignation of Lauraguais, who was one of the warmest supporters of the innovation,

and his indignation vented itself in a *Mémoire sur l'inoculation*, wherein M. Joly de Fleury was very roughly handled. This memoir he read before the Académie des Sciences, of which he was a member, and demanded permission to print it. The Academy at first demurred, but ultimately gave its consent, on the understanding that the references to the Advocate-General should be expunged. Apparently this condition was not observed, for the publication of the memoir was followed by an acrimonious correspondence, ending with a *lettre de cachet*, which directed that M. le Comte de Lauraguais should be conveyed to Metz and imprisoned in the citadel during his Majesty's pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

On learning of the arrest of her lover, Sophie was in despair. She closed her salon and put on mourning. The few friends who were permitted to intrude upon her sorrow found her dissolved in tears, and went about declaring that nothing so pathetic had ever been seen before. The Abbé de Voisenon wrote to the imprisoned count, describing in touching language the actress's grief, and felicitating him on having found a faithful mistress at the Opera; a piece of good fortune, said the abbé, so remarkable that it ought to go far to console him for his captivity :

“Ne te plains pas de ton malheur,  
Du cœur de La Vallière il te fournit la preuve,  
On assure qu'Arnould se souvient d'être veuve  
Et que de sa constance elle fait son bonheur.”

Lauraguais's family and friends did everything in their power to procure his release; but both Louis XV. and Choiseul had come to regard that nobleman as a

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, iii. 297.



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public nuisance, and turned a deaf ear to their appeals. And so the count remained for some four months at Metz, and might have remained a good deal longer, had not a fortunate chance enabled Sophie to intervene on his behalf.

On November 2, the opera of *Dardanus* was played before the Court, at Fontainebleau, Sophie taking the part of the heroine Iphise, one of her most successful impersonations. On this occasion she appears to have surpassed herself, and even the bored King was moved to something like admiration. Profiting by the impression she had created, without waiting to doff the robes of Iphise, she begged for a few minutes' conversation with the Duc de Choiseul, and, throwing herself at his feet, besought him to release her lover. "The heart of the gallant and all-powerful Minister was touched, and he had not the courage to refuse to this beautiful and tearful Iphise the return of her *Dardanus*."<sup>1</sup>

Lauraguais returned more infatuated than ever. Gratitude had redoubled his love for his mistress; never had she appeared to him more adorable. Declaring that it was his intention to consecrate to her alone the liberty which he owed to her, he installed himself at Sophie's house, as in the early days of their *liaison*, and refused even to see his unfortunate wife, whom he unjustly suspected of having been a trifle lukewarm in her efforts to obtain his release. This was a little too much for the endurance even of that long-suffering lady, and,

<sup>1</sup> *Arnoldiana*. According to another account, Choiseul came to Sophie's dressing-room, on the conclusion of the performance, to compliment her and assure her of the great pleasure she had afforded the King. "Ah well!" she replied, "tell his Majesty that, if he is satisfied with Iphise, he should restore to her *Dardanus*!"

soon afterwards, she sought and obtained a judicial separation.

His few months' imprisonment at Metz would appear to have exercised a chastening effect upon the volatile count, as, for the next three or four years, though quarrels were still of frequent occurrence, there was no open rupture between the lovers. During this period, two more children were born to them: a son, Antoine Constant, who subsequently entered the army, rose to be colonel of a regiment of cuirassiers, and was killed at the battle of Wagram; and a daughter, Alexandrine Sophie, of whom we shall have something to say later on.

Perhaps the comparative harmony which now reigned between this singular pair was the result of a tacit understanding that they should forgive and forget. At any rate, they were very far from being all in all to one another during these years. Some doubt seems to have existed as to whether Alexandrine Sophie, born March 7, 1767, had not the right to claim an even more illustrious descent than that of the Brancas; for, though M. de Lauraguais recognised the child as his, the assiduous attentions paid by the Prince de Conti to her mother rendered it quite possible that she had royal blood in her veins. On his side, the count indulged in several "*passades*," one of which, with a certain Mlle. Robbi, a colleague of Sophie, threatened to develop into a more permanent connection. Finally, in the spring of 1768, the union was again dissolved, Lauraguais being, on this occasion, the one to sever the knot.

On February 26 of that year, a young German *danseuse*, Mlle. Heinel by name, who had already achieved a reputation in Vienna, made her appearance at the Opera, and created a great sensation. "Mlle. Heinel," says

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Grimm, "afflicted with seventeen or eighteen years, two large, expressive eyes, and two well-shaped legs, which support a very pretty face and figure, has arrived from Vienna and made her *début* at the Opera in the *danse noble*. She displays a precision, a sureness, an aplomb, and a dignity of bearing comparable to the great Vestris. The connoisseurs of dancing pretend that, in two or three years, Mlle. Heinel will be the first *danseuse* in Europe, and the connoisseurs of charms are disputing the glory of ruining themselves for her."<sup>1</sup>

In a letter written some months later, Grimm becomes quite ecstatic over the beauty and talent of his young compatriot :

"Her grace and dignity make of her a celestial creature. To see her, I do not say dance, but merely walk across the stage, is alone worth the money that one pays at the door of the Opera."<sup>2</sup>

The charms of this "celestial creature" proved

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, v. 431.

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, vi. 145. Mlle. Heinel seems also to have made a very favourable impression upon Horace Walpole, who mentions her several times in his letters, and always in terms of admiration. After seeing her for the first time, on the occasion of his visit to Paris, in 1771, he writes to the Earl of Strafford: "There is a finer dancer [than Mlle. Guimard], whom M. Hobart is to transplant to London; a Mademoiselle Heinel, or Ingle, a Fleming. She is tall, perfectly made, very handsome, and has a set of attitudes copied from the classics. She moves as gracefully slow as Pygmalion's statue when it was coming to life, and moves her leg round as imperceptibly as if she was dancing in the Zodiac. But she is not Virgo." The lady came to London that same winter, and danced for some months at Covent Garden, where she created as much enthusiasm as in Paris. On April 21, 1772, Walpole writes again: "I am just going to the Opera to hear Milice sing. I do not believe he will draw such audiences as Mlle. Heinel has done. The town has an idle notion that she made so much impression upon a very high heart, that it is thought prudent to keep it out of her way. She is the most graceful figure in the world, with



more than the susceptible heart of M. de Lauraguais could withstand, and we read in the *Mémoires secrets*, under date March 28, 1768 :

“ Her (Mlle. Heinel’s) attractions have so captivated M. le Comte de Lauraguais as to cause him to forget those of Mlle. Arnoux (*sic*). He has given her, as a wedding-present à l’*Allemand*, 30,000 livres, 20,000 livres to a brother, to whom she is much attached, an exquisite set of furniture, a coach, and so forth. It is computed that the *première* cost this magnificent nobleman 100,000 livres.”

Sophie appears to have been anything but heart-broken at the desertion of her eccentric lover—probably she was as anxious to be rid of him, for a season, as he was to leave her—and, less than a year later, we find her corresponding with him in the friendliest manner. By that time the count had had more than enough of the society of Mlle. Heinel, concerning whom Sophie has many spiteful things to say. She herself, she informs him—perhaps with a view of exciting his jealousy—is receiving great attention from the Prince de Conti, who often invites her, together with other past, present, and potential members of his seraglio,<sup>1</sup> to his box at the Opera, where he invariably greets her with a kiss upon the chin.<sup>2</sup>

charming eyes, beautiful mouth, and lovely countenance ; yet I do not think we shall see a Dame du Barri on this side the Channel.”

The staid Dr. Burney was another of Mlle. Heinel’s admirers, and informs us that, besides the six hundred pounds salary she received from the management of Covent Garden, she was “ complimented with a *regallo* of six hundred more from the Macaroni Club.”

<sup>1</sup> This prince is said to have had sixty acknowledged mistresses, besides occasional and “ imperceptible ” ones.

<sup>2</sup> In her *Mémoires*, Sophie writes : “ The prince had, for a moment, the

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Sophie's life at this period affords us very little that is edifying to contemplate, and much that is the reverse. Her apartment in the Rue du Dauphin was the rendez-vous of many wits and men of letters: Marmontel, Crébillon *fil*s, Dorat, Voisenon, and the Abbé Arnaud; but it was also frequented by nearly all the fashionable libertines of the day, and "her table was an altar of free life and free love." "Foreign Ambassadors covered her with diamonds, Serene Highnesses threw themselves at her feet, dukes and peers sent her carriages, and Princes of the Blood deigned to have children by her."<sup>1</sup> Unlike the majority of her colleagues, who clung tenaciously to the few poor shreds of reputation that were left them, Sophie appears to have been perfectly indifferent to public opinion, and jested cynically with comparative strangers on the depraved life she was leading.

In the spring of 1770, we find her accepting a new *amant en titre*, in the person of Charles Alexander Marc Marcellin d'Alsace, Prince d'Hénin et du Saint-Empire. The Prince d'Hénin was a dull, pompous man, nicknamed, by a play on his title, "*le prince des nains*," who seems to have taken the actress under his protection merely because it was the mode in those days to keep a mistress, and the more notorious the lady, the greater the distinction she conferred upon her lover. His chief recommendations, so far as Sophie was concerned, were that he was very rich and disposed to allow her to do idea of devoting himself to me. But he wished me to be entirely his own, without any distraction or reserve. I never had any taste for exaggerated grandeurs, and am of the opinion of that philosopher who said that happiness is only to be found in moderation."

<sup>1</sup> E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 70. According to the *Chronique scandaleuse*, Sophie had a daughter by the Prince de Condé, who afterwards married the Comte de R \*\*\*.

pretty much as she pleased, so long as the admirers whom he chanced to encounter on his visits to her house behaved towards him with the deference which he considered due to his exalted rank.

Her apartment in the Rue du Dauphin not being large enough to accommodate all the distinguished persons who desired to pay homage to her, Sophie, about this time, removed to a more commodious one in the Rue des Petits-Champs. This, in its turn, becoming too small for her requirements, she made up her mind to have an hôtel built, and selected a site in the Chaussée-d'Antin, immediately adjoining the hôtel of Mlle. Guimard—the “Temple of Terpsichore,” as it was called—the erection of which had half-ruined more than one of the adorers of “*la squelette des Grâces*.”

In the Bibliothèque Nationale may be seen a drawing of the façade of the proposed house, and plans of the *rez-de-chaussée* and the first and second floors. The drawing of the façade bears the following inscription :

“Façade of a projected house for Mlle. Arnould in the Chaussée-d'Antin. The house to be constructed side by side with that of Mlle. Guimard, and to be of the same dimensions.—Belanger.”

On the portico, which is supported by two Doric columns, may be seen the figure of the Muse Euterpe, with the features of Sophie Arnould. The plan of the second floor is inscribed : “Plan of the second floor of Mlle. Arnould's projected house, in which there are to be four small rooms for the accommodation of the children.”

This palace never got beyond the paper stage, for Sophie fell in love with the architect and the architect with her, in consequence of which, we may presume,



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the Prince d'Hénin, or whatever wealthy admirer was to have defrayed the expenses, declined to have anything further to do with the scheme.

François Joseph Belanger, the architect in question, was a charming man. He was then about thirty years of age, handsome, good-tempered, witty, and one of the most rising members of his profession.<sup>1</sup> Sophie loved him dearly—for a time at least—though this did not prevent her indulging in various passing fancies. Once, when he was temporarily out of favour, she sent him his *congé*, and, at the same time, wrote to an actor named Florence, inviting him to take the vacant place in her affections. Belanger, however, happening to call at her house at a time when she was not at home, found the two letters on her desk, read them, and promptly changed the envelopes. The result was that Florence received the *congé*, instead of the avowal of love, and naturally became very cold in his manner towards Sophie, who, deeply mortified, turned for consolation to her faithful architect.

At one time a rumour was current that Sophie was about to become Madame Belanger, and, when questioned on the matter, the lady replied: "What would you have? So many people are endeavouring to destroy my reputation that I need some one who can restore it. I could not make a better choice, since I have selected an architect!" The marriage, however, did not take place, though that would not appear to have been the fault of Belanger.

<sup>1</sup> He was the architect of Bagatelle, in the Bois de Boulogne, which he built for the Comte d'Artois, and designed the gardens of the Château de Meréville (Seine-et-Oise) and of Belœil, in Belgium, the seat of the Prince de Ligne. Extant specimens of his work are the hôtel built for Mlle. Contat, at the corner of the Rue de Berri, in the Champs-Élysées, and the dome of the old Halle aux Blés, now the Bourse du Commerce.

Notwithstanding the fact that a lady with so romantic a past, and three fine children to prevent people forgetting it, was hardly the kind of wife for a rising professional man, the architect would have been only too willing to regularise their connection. But Sophie had no mind to marry any one who was unable to satisfy all her caprices; and it is probable that the rumour referred to was started and circulated by her with the object of giving the lie to another, which was occasioning her intense annoyance.<sup>1</sup>

Sophie's insolence and pride in this the heyday of her prosperity knew no bounds. She insulted the Lieutenant of Police and was, in consequence, placed under arrest for twenty-four hours; she made biting epigrams about Ministers and other distinguished persons, which, no doubt, duly reached her victims' ears; she behaved with such "unexampled audacity" and "essential want of respect" towards Madame du Barry, on the occasion of a performance before the Court, at Fontainebleau, that, but for the intervention of the injured lady—the most sweet-tempered left-hand queen who ever degraded a throne—she would have spent the next six months as a prisoner in the Hôpital,<sup>2</sup> and she drove the unfortunate directors of the Opera to the verge of distraction with her whims and caprices.

The race of prime donne is proverbially a capricious

<sup>1</sup> One which accused her of practising the shameful vices of antiquity. See E. and J. de Goncourt's *Sophie Arnould*, p. 86 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Madame du Barry was, however, amply avenged. Sophie's comrades of the theatre, scarcely one of whom but had suffered from her sarcastic tongue, were not slow to avail themselves of so excellent an opportunity of paying their tormentor back in her own coin, and, for some time afterwards, never failed to let fall the odious word "*Hôpital*," whenever Mlle. Arnould happened to be within earshot; a proceeding which, Bachaumont tells us, "no doubt greatly humiliated that superb queen of opera."

one; the profession of an impresario one of the most trying which can fall to the lot of man. Yet, it may be doubted whether any queen of song since opera was invented can have occasioned her managers anything approaching the anxiety and annoyance caused by Mlle. Sophie Arnould. She knew she was necessary, well-nigh indispensable, and she abused her position. Dearly did the administration pay for the increased receipts which her popularity brought them. Every day she had some new grievance, some unexpected whim. She wished to sing and she did not wish to sing, she retired and she reappeared. Sometimes she would create a part in an opera, sing divinely to crowded houses for three or four nights, then suddenly discover that it was unsuited to her or made too great demands upon her strength, and insist upon another singer taking her place for the remainder of the run of the piece. A few evenings later, jealous perhaps of the applause which her successor was receiving, she would come down to the theatre and announce her intention of resuming her part, only to throw it up again so soon as she considered that she had asserted her superiority.

To revive an opera in which she had scored a success was often as risky a venture as to produce a new one, since it might, and very often did, happen, that Mlle. Arnould—who, it should be mentioned, unlike the majority of public performers, cared very little for applause—would be indisposed, that is to say, indisposed to exert her full powers, with the result that the once popular piece would be received in comparative silence. In February 1769, *Dardanus* was revived. Iphise, the heroine, was one of Sophie's greatest rôles, but on the first night she either could not or would not sing,



and the opera became, in consequence, "almost a burlesque."

It is only, however, fair to say that she made ample atonement on the following evening. Thinking perhaps, as one of her biographers suggests, that any one was good enough to sing with a voiceless prima donna, the management entrusted the part of Dardanus to a new tenor named Muguet, "who had neither voice, figure, nor expression." The audience not unnaturally resented the experiment, and M. Muguet and the opera with him were in a fair way to be hissed off the stage, when Sophie came to the rescue and, by superb singing and impassioned acting, restored the house to good humour and converted a complete failure into something approaching a success.

Seeing that the ladies of the Opera were the King's servants in the literal sense of the phrase, and that misbehaviour on their part was wont to be construed as disobedience to his Majesty's commands and punished accordingly, why, it may well be asked, was such conduct tolerated? Why did not the chief of the King's Household intervene with one of those *lettres de cachet* which were generally so efficacious in bringing contumacious artistes to their senses? The answer is that Sophie had so many noble admirers always ready to espouse her cause that to punish her as she deserved could not have failed to create a great deal of unpleasantness; for which reason, though the directors appealed again and again to the Comte de Saint-Florentin to exercise his authority, their representations were without effect. Here is an instance:

On March 24, 1772, Sophie, who was announced to take the part of Thélaira, in Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*, had

not arrived when the time came for the opera to begin, and her place was, therefore, taken by her understudy, Mlle. Beaumesnil. As no intimation of her inability to appear that evening had reached them, the directors naturally concluded that she had been suddenly taken ill, and their astonishment and indignation may be imagined when they presently espied the lady in a box, laughing and talking with several of her admirers, and, seemingly, in the best of health and spirits. A message demanding an explanation of what she meant by appearing in the front of the house when she was "billed" to play a part produced the impertinent reply that she had come to take a lesson from Mlle. Beaumesnil! The angry directors thereupon appealed to the chief of the King's Household and begged him to send the recalcitrant actress to For l'Évêque. But the Prince d'Hénin, or some other influential adorer, interceded on her behalf, and the only punishment she received was "a severe reprimand."

Such misplaced leniency, Bachaumont tells us, was highly displeasing to a certain section of the Opera's patrons, and when, an evening or two later, Mademoiselle did condescend to appear, a number of people came to the theatre "with the intention of humiliating her by hissing." Sophie, however, perhaps desirous of making atonement to the public for its previous disappointment, put forth all her powers and sang and acted so admirably that the malcontents' courage failed them, and, finally, forgetting the object which had brought them thither, they joined heartily in the general applause.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to the cares of maternity and other causes, chief of which would seem to have been a pronounced

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, vi. 136.

antipathy to hard work, Sophie's appearances at the Opera were very irregular, and sometimes her name did not find a place in the bills for several months together. Thus, she was absent from October 1761 to the following February; again from November 1766 to August 1767; while in 1770 she does not appear to have sung at all. A less popular actress, or one whose life outside the theatre was less notorious, might have incurred some risk of finding herself forgotten. But Sophie's admirers were numerous and faithful, and when she had a part which suited her, and was in the humour to do herself justice, her singing and, more especially, her acting were so superior to her rivals that the house was invariably crowded. Among her triumphs may be mentioned: *Thisbé*, in *Pyrame et Thisbé*; *Oriane*, in *Amadis de Gaule*; <sup>1</sup> *Aline*, in *Aline, Reine de Golconde*,<sup>2</sup> "which," says Bachaumont, "she endowed with all the delicate graces of sentiment, beauty, and talent"; *Psyché*, in *L'Amour et Psyché*; *Iphise*, in *Dardanus*, and *Thélaïre*, in *Castor et Pollux*, when the critic of the *Mercure* declared that she was "not a character of the piece,

<sup>1</sup> Eighteenth-century composers appear to have been continually tinkering with this unfortunate opera, one of the most popular of the famous Lulli-Quinault series. When it was revived in January 1759, La Borde, Louis XV.'s musical *valet-de-chambre*, made various alterations in the music, "which disgusted equally the partisans of the old and the new schools." In November 1771, Berton, one of the directors of the Opera, substituted some very inferior melodies of his own, which, if possible, were even less to the taste of the audience, and, eight years later, Johann Christian Bach, the eleventh son of the celebrated master, tried his hand at the score, likewise without success.

<sup>2</sup> This was one of the most successful of Sophie's "creations." The piece, the libretto of which had been adapted by Sedaine from a *conte* of the Chevalier de Boufflers, published in 1761, was played twenty-six times in succession, an unusually long run in those days.



but Thélaiïre herself, and that the feelings she depicted passed involuntarily into the souls of the spectators.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Belanger was Mlle. Arnould's *amant de cœur*, the Prince d'Hénin remained her titular protector. The prince was an exceedingly dull and fatuous person, with the most absurdly exaggerated idea of his own importance, and bored the lady insufferably, although financial considerations compelled her to tolerate him. At the same time, she was at no pains to conceal from her friends the *ennui* which his visits occasioned her, and when, at the beginning of the year 1774, the Comte de Lauraguais, with whom she still maintained friendly relations, returned from a lengthy visit to England, she hastened to pour her troubles into his sympathetic ear. Perhaps Lauraguais would have been not unwilling to resume his connection with Sophie, had there been no Prince d'Hénin in the way, and cherished a grudge against that nobleman for taking the place which had so long been his own. Perhaps he had some other grievance against him, for the prince was by no means universally beloved. Any way, he determined to have a little diversion at his expense. We read in the *Mémoires secrets* :

“February 19, 1774.—The Comte de Lauraguais,

<sup>1</sup> The *Mercury* is lavish in its praise of Sophie's rendering of Colin, the boy's part, in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Devin du Village*, in which she appeared in December 1767. But Mr. Douglas thinks that her performance was less successful than that rather partial organ declared it to be. At all events, he says, she did not repeat the experiment, and was always extremely sarcastic if any of her fellow actresses undertook masculine parts. Mlle. Allard, whose innumerable *galanteries* had astonished, and almost shocked, even the nymphs of the Opera, one day happened to remark, after playing such a part, that she believed that half the audience really thought she was a boy. “But the other half *knew* you were not, *ma chère*,” observed Sophie.

that amiable nobleman, whose inextinguishable gaiety is so marvellously seconded by his lively imagination, after having amused London, has come to enliven this capital with his sallies and ingenious pleasantries, of which one relates a charming instance : Some days ago, he summoned four doctors of the Faculty of Medicine to a consultation, in order to know whether it were possible for any one to die of *ennui*. They replied in the affirmative and, after a long preamble, setting forth the reasons for their decision, signed a paper to that effect, in all good faith. The family of Brancas is so generally composed of lunatics, hypochondriacs, hysterical and melancholy persons, and so forth, that they imagined that the question put to them concerned some relative of the consultant, and agreed that the only means of effecting a cure was to remove out of the patient's sight the object which occasioned this condition of inertia and stagnation.

“ Armed with this document duly signed and witnessed, the facetious nobleman proceeded to lay it before a Commissary of Police and, at the same time, to lodge a complaint against the Prince d'Hénin, who, by his continual *obsession* of Mlle. Arnoux (*sic*), would infallibly cause that actress to perish of *ennui*, and the public to lose one whom it valued highly, and whom he especially desired to preserve.”

Needless to say, the commissary did not issue the warrant demanded ; but, equally needless to say, he related the jest to every one he happened to meet that morning, with the result that, in a very few hours, this “ charming instance of the inextinguishable humour of the Comte de Lauraguais ” was the talk of Paris, and was voted the best comedy that had been played for many a long day. The Prince d'Hénin naturally did not

look at the matter in quite the same light, and talked about sending the count a challenge. According to one account, he actually did so, and a bloodless duel followed. But since, as we shall presently see, he was a nobleman by no means remarkable for his courage, it is more probable that he ultimately decided to pocket the affront.

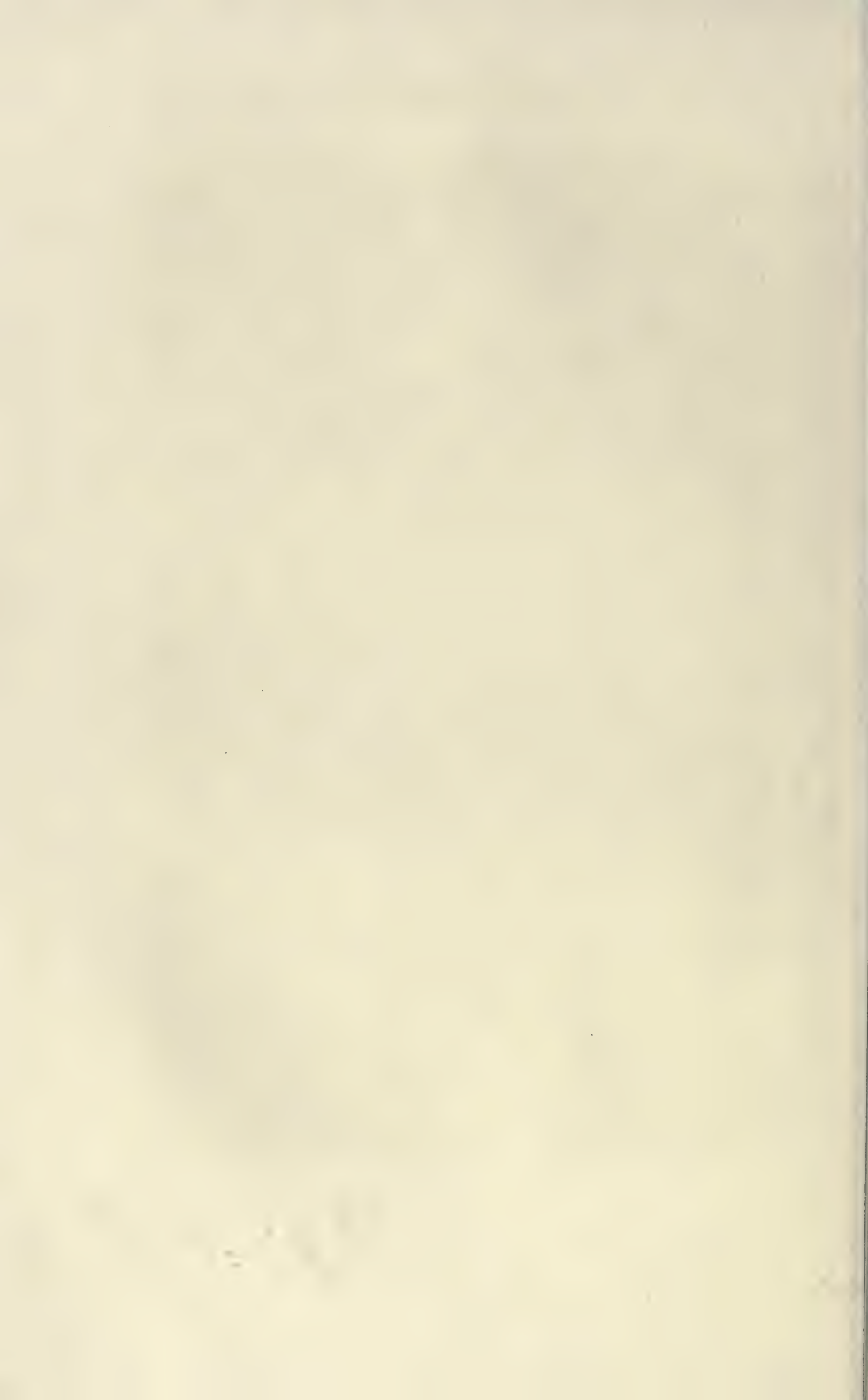
In the course of that same month, Sophie Arnould determined to withdraw altogether from the Opera and, accordingly, sent in her resignation, giving as her reason the unsatisfactory state of her health. The Duc de la Vrillière, however, declined to accept it, at the same time assuring her, in a courteous letter, that, "under no circumstances would more be required of her than her strength would permit of her undertaking." Although it would appear that Sophie was really somewhat out of health at that time—so that Lauraguais's charge against the poor Prince d'Hénin was not without a basis of truth—her resolution to quit the scene of her many triumphs was dictated by a very different reason. The fact of the matter was that the Sophie Arnould of 1774 was not the Sophie Arnould of 1758—not the singer who had charmed all Paris in *Les Amours des Dieux* and *Enée et Lavinie*. Her voice, always more expressive than powerful, was becoming perceptibly weaker. Her beauty, though she was still very attractive, had lost its freshness. Her frequent absences, her endless caprices, her arrogance and insolence, so long tolerated, had begun to weary not only the long-suffering directors of the Opera, but the public and the critics who influenced it. Where there had been applause, there was now silence. Where there had been praise, there was now criticism, and criticism sometimes of a peculiarly galling kind. In a word, Sophie's long reign was drawing to a close. And Paris





GLUCK

After the painting by N. F. DUPLESSIS



was eagerly awaiting the arrival of a new composer. Gluck, who was to revolutionise opera in France, was coming, at the invitation of Marie Antoinette, to give a series of "musical dramas"—as he himself called them—reconstructed from those which had delighted Vienna and Italy. Supported as he would be by the young Dauphiness and the Court, his success was a foregone conclusion. What unthinkable humiliation for her if, when the principal parts came to be allotted, she should be passed over in favour of one of her youthful competitors : Mlle. Laguerre or, worse still, Rosalie Levasseur, the mistress of Mercy-Argenteau, the Austrian Ambassador, between whom and herself the bitterest rivalry existed ! Rather than incur such a risk, she would retire of her own accord, while her laurels were still untarnished, while her sovereignty was still acknowledged.

But, as we have just seen, her resignation was not accepted, and when Gluck arrived in Paris, he appears to have had little difficulty in deciding to entrust the title-part in his *Iphigénie en Aulide* to her, though his choice was probably influenced more by Sophie's histrionic than her vocal capabilities, for while her voice was neither so powerful nor so fresh as those of the two ladies mentioned above, her acting was immeasurably superior to theirs.

We are inclined to think, however, that even if Sophie had been much less fitted than she was to undertake the difficult rôle of Iphigénie, Gluck would still have hesitated before passing her over, since to have done so would have been certain to arouse a storm of hostile criticism, a singularly inauspicious opening to his Paris campaign. As matters stood, his position was, at first, far from an easy one. The musical world of Paris was the most critical and contentious of any capital in Europe,



and the advent of a foreign operatic troupe or a new composer was invariably the sign for the amateurs of music to range themselves into hostile camps and to discuss the merits and demerits of the innovation with as much warmth as, in the present day, rival schools of politicians might debate a question of international importance. Just as in 1752, when an Italian troupe came to perform the *Serva Padrona* of Pergolese and other works of the Italian buffo order, all musical Paris was divided into Buffonists and anti-Buffonists; so now, immediately on Gluck's arrival, two parties were formed, one prepared to laud to the skies everything the master might compose, the other resolved to uphold the traditions of the old French opera at all costs and to drive the daring reformer from the field.<sup>1</sup>

Gluck found the task of producing *Iphigénie* the most difficult of any which he had yet undertaken. What he saw and heard at the Palais-Royal disgusted as much as it astonished him; orchestra, singers, chorus, ballet—all were lamentably inefficient, and it was obvious that a course of the most rigorous training would be required ere they would be competent to do his work anything like justice. The state of the Paris Opera at this time was indeed almost incredible. "Disorder, abuse, caprice, routine, inertia," says Desnoiresterres, "were despotically enthroned there, without a protest from any one. If reform were urgent, so many persons were interested in the *statu quo* that there was scarcely any hope of obtaining from the administration, from this ignorant and prejudiced crowd, any improvement that was at all practical. In the midst of all the pomp and expenditure was a carelessness, an anarchy, a disorder past all belief. Actors

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Ernest Newman, "Gluck and the Opera," p. 133.

and actresses pushed indecency to such a point as to appear outside the *coulisses*, the latter in white camisoles with a *culotte d'argent* and a band across the forehead; the former in a simple peignoir. It was not an infrequent sight, while the foreground was occupied by Jupiter or Theseus, to see, through the scenes, the dancers moving and fluttering about, they having actually chosen the background of the stage to practise their steps and make their *jetés-battus*.”<sup>1</sup> The choruses drew themselves up in a semi-circle, impassive, without a gesture, like grenadiers on guard, and evinced not the slightest interest either in the words they had to sing or in the action of the principal performers. The latter went to the opposite extreme. “One sees the actresses, almost in convulsions, violently tear the yelps out of their lungs, their fists clenched against their chest, the head thrown back, the face inflamed, the veins swollen, the stomach heaving; one does not know which is the more disagreeably affected, the eye or the ear; their exertion gives as much pain to those who see them as their singing does to those who hear them.”<sup>2</sup>

The orchestra, which in winter was in the habit of performing in gloves, is compared by Mercier, the author of *Le Tableau de Paris*, to “an old coach drawn by consumptive horses and led by one deaf from his birth,” and besides being careless and indifferent, was continually at variance with the singers on the question whether the latter should follow the musicians or the musicians follow them. Grétry relates the following conversation, which took place between Sophie Arnould and Francœur, the conductor of the orchestra, during a rehearsal of his own opera of *Céphale et Procris*, in 1773 :

<sup>1</sup> *Gluck et Piccini*, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

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"What is the meaning of this, Monsieur? The orchestra seems in a state of rebellion?"

"What do you mean by rebellion, Mademoiselle? We are all here for the service of the King, and we serve him zealously."

"I should like to serve him also, but your orchestra puts me out and spoils my singing."

"Nevertheless, Mademoiselle, we play in time."

"In time! *Quelle bête est-ce là?* Follow me, Monsieur, and understand that your accompaniment is the very humble servant of the actress who is reciting!"

As the Goncourts point out, under the apparent insolence of her claim, Sophie was here asserting the rights of the dramatic vocalist before the musical revolution, of which Gluck was the pioneer, when opera-singers were regarded merely as men and women reciting musical tragedy with intonations indicated by a musician. Until then they had enjoyed the most complete independence as to the manner of presenting their phrases. Until then they had been at liberty to hurry or slacken the time, to pause on or shorten any particular note, according to the inspiration of the moment, or even as they felt more or less fatigued, the orchestra following as best it could. "*Quelle bête est-ce là?*" Sophie had but little doubt when she uttered these words that *cette bête* was on the eve of reducing her talent and reputation to nothing."<sup>1</sup>

The pretension, however, was one which a composer, like Gluck, "who took the trouble to note not only the inflections of the voice, but also the long notes and the short ones, the accent and the time," could not for one moment tolerate; and his insistence on its abandonment

<sup>1</sup> E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 119.



was the cause of endless wrangling at rehearsals, where the principal vocalists roundly declared that, if he refused them the liberty which had so long been theirs, their talent would become superfluous and they would be reduced to the level of mere chorus-singers.

These disputes were chiefly with the lady members of the troupe, though the male singers did not fail to occasion the composer an infinity of trouble. Legros, who had been cast for the part of Achilles, had an admirable voice, but his singing was totally lacking in expression, while his movements on the stage were stiff and awkward; and though Gluck laboured unceasingly to remedy these faults, it was some months ere he succeeded. Larrivée, to whom had been entrusted the rôle of Agamemnon, was even more difficult to deal with, being so obstinate and self-opinionated that to remonstrate with him seemed almost waste of breath. Once the composer was forced to tell him that he seemed to have no comprehension of his part, and to be unable to enter into the spirit of it. "Wait till I put on my costume," answered the singer complacently; "you won't recognise me then." At the general rehearsal Gluck took his seat in a box. Larrivée reappeared, in the costume of Agamemnon, but his interpretation remained the same. "Ah, my friend!" cried the composer, "I recognise you perfectly!"<sup>1</sup> Finally, Gluck had to contend with the ballet, and, in particular, with its chief, the celebrated Gaetano Vestris—"le dieu de la danse"—who once observed that there were only three great men in Europe: Frederick II., Voltaire, and himself! Vestris naturally considered the dancing by far the most important feature of an opera, and, although there were

<sup>1</sup> Desnoiresterres, *Gluck et Piccini*, p. 93.

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already several ballets in *Iphigénie*, wanted yet another. Gluck angrily refused.

"*Quoi !*" stammered Vestris ; "*moi ! le dieu de la danse !*"

"If you are the God of Dancing, Monsieur," replied the composer, "dance in heaven, not in my opera!"<sup>1</sup>

When, some months later, *Orphée* was being rehearsed, the ballet-master asked Gluck to write him the music of a chaconne. The latter, who had strongly objected to the introduction of any dancing whatever into *Orphée*, being of opinion that it would interfere with the seriousness and pathos of the general action, was horrified.

"A chaconne!" he cried. "Do you suppose, Monsieur, that the Greeks, whose manners I am endeavouring to depict, knew what a chaconne was?"

"Did they not?" rejoined the God of Dancing. "Then they are much to be pitied!"

In those days it was the custom to attend the rehearsals of a piece which happened to be arousing an unusual amount of interest, and the demand for admission to those of *Iphigénie* was so great that La Vrillière wrote to the directors of the Opera, ordering them to take special precautions to avoid any disturbance and to allow no one to enter without a ticket signed by themselves. The desire to be present is not difficult to understand, since to see Gluck at a rehearsal must have been a sight not easily forgotten. Throwing off his coat and replacing his wig by an old cotton night-cap, he would dart about the stage, imploring Mlle. Arnould to follow his music, M. Larrivée not to sing through his nose, M. Legros to endeavour to express something at least of the dignity and nobility which one was accustomed

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Ernest Newman, "Gluck and the Opera," p. 139.

to associate with the great champion of the Greeks, and the chorus to endeavour to look and move a little less like automata. "Look you, Mademoiselle!" he would cry, purple with passion, when Sophie or some other actress proved more than usually contumacious, "I am here to make you perform *Iphigénie*. If you are willing to sing, nothing can be better. If you are not willing to do so, do not trouble. I will go and see Madame la Dauphine and tell her what you say. If it is impossible for me to get my opera produced, I shall order my travelling-carriage and take the road to Vienna."

This indeed was no idle threat, and had it not been for the support accorded him by Marie Antoinette, there can be very little doubt that he would have shaken the dust of Paris off his feet. But, with the Dauphiness behind him, the malcontents, grumble as they might, had no option but to obey this terrible man, whom they devoutly wished at the bottom of the Seine.

The first performance was fixed for April 13, 1774, but almost at the last moment Legros announced that he was too ill to appear. Gluck immediately demanded the postponement of the opera. The management pointed out that the Royal Family were to be present, and that all arrangements had been made for their reception, and begged him to allow another singer to take the place of the absent tenor. The composer rejoined that, rather than see his work mutilated by an inferior rendering of so important a part, he would throw it into the fire; and the directors were compelled to give way.

The opera was eventually produced on April 19, amidst the most intense excitement. From eleven o'clock in the morning the box-offices were besieged by an immense concourse of people, and it was found



necessary to double and treble the ordinary guard, to prevent disorder. The public interest was no doubt stimulated by rumours that the Anti-Gluckists were planning a hostile demonstration; and Marie Antoinette, in great alarm for the success of her *protégé*, sent orders to the Lieutenant of Police to take measures to nip any such attempt in the bud. The Dauphiness herself, accompanied by her obedient husband, the Comte and Comtesse de Provence, the Duchesses de Chartres and de Bourbon, and the Princesse de Lamballe, entered the theatre before the public was admitted, and was followed by most of the Ministers and practically the whole Court; indeed, but for the absence of Louis XV.—who scarcely ever visited Paris during the later years of his reign—and Madame du Barry, the spectators might have imagined themselves at Versailles or Fontainebleau.

The opera was very cordially received,<sup>1</sup> though, according to Grimm, parts pleased more than the ensemble. Both he and the *Mémoires secrets* are very severe upon the ballets, “the airs of which had been absolutely neglected”; while the latter declare that “the decorations were pitiable.” The second representation did not take place until three days later, when the crowd was even greater than on the first night, and a brisk and remunerative business was done by certain speculators, who had bought up the two-franc *parterre* tickets and retailed them at from three to seven times their value.<sup>2</sup> During the interval, certain improve-

<sup>1</sup> The *Mémoires secrets* attribute much of the applause to “the desire of the public to please Madame la Dauphine, who did not cease to clap her hands, and thus compelled the Comtesse de Provence, the princes, and all the boxes to do likewise.”

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, vii. 185.

ments appear to have been made in the ballets, scenery, and accessories, for the opera was now "applauded to the skies, and, when the curtain fell, the calls for the author lasted for half an hour."<sup>1</sup> The author, however, did not appear, being ill in bed, a fact which, considering all the worry and anxiety he had suffered during the past few weeks, will hardly occasion much surprise.

All the leading performers distinguished themselves, and Sophie covered herself with glory. "Mlle. Arnould," says the *Mercury*, "charms as much as she astonishes us in the rôle of Iphigénie, by her dignified and sympathetic acting, by the animation and correctness of her singing, by an expression always true and delicate; by her voice itself, which seems in this opera to possess more variety, power, and extent." Grimm, a far less partial observer, where Sophie is concerned, than the musical critic of the *Mercury*, is equally enthusiastic: "She renders the part of Iphigénie as it has perhaps never been rendered at the Comédie-Française, and she sings not only with all the charm that we have found in her for a long time past, but with an infinite precision, which is less common with her. It seems that the Chevalier Gluck has exactly divined the character and range of her voice and has assigned to it all the notes of her part."<sup>2</sup>

*Iphigénie* grew in favour with each repetition and soon became quite the rage, as a proof of which may be mentioned the fact that the ladies began to wear a "head-dress in the form of a coronet surmounted by the crescent of Diana, whence escaped a kind of veil that covered the back of the head; it was called à l'*Iphigénie*."

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, viii. 322.

<sup>2</sup> Métra, *Correspondance secrète*, i. 64.

Encouraged by the success which had attended *Iphigénie*, Gluck at once set to work to adapt *Orfeo*, the most successful of the operas he had produced in Italy, for the Paris stage. A good many alterations were necessary, as the title-part had originally been written for a contralto, the celebrated Guadagni, and it had now to be cast for Legros. That gentleman, whose head would appear to have been slightly turned by the applause he had received as Achilles, when handed his part, informed the composer that he should decline to sing it, unless he had an opportunity of making a brilliant exit in the first act; and this necessitated further alterations. However, the rest of the troupe were by this time far more amenable to reason than they had been during the rehearsals of *Iphigénie*, and by the end of July the opera was ready for production.

It was while *Orphée* was in preparation that an incident occurred which was not without its effect upon Sophie Arnould's connection with the operas of Gluck. After her triumph in the part of Iphigénie, Sophie had, of course, been entrusted with that of Eurydice, and had persuaded the composer to hold some informal rehearsals in her apartment in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs. Now, for some reason, the prima donna's titular protector, the Prince d'Hénin, had conceived a strong antipathy to Gluck (Mr. Douglas supposes that he was displeased at the frequency of the composer's visits to his mistress's house, though, as jealousy was certainly not one of his failings, this seems to us hardly probable), and had on several occasions let fall very disparaging remarks about the German musician, which had in due course reached the latter's ears. One day, in the midst of a rehearsal, the Prince d'Hénin was



announced. All rose from their seats and bowed—all, that is to say, save Gluck, who settled himself more firmly in his chair and took not the slightest notice of the distinguished visitor.

"I was under the impression," remarked the Prince, when he had recovered from his first astonishment, "that it is the custom in France to rise when any one enters the room, especially if it be a person of consideration."

Gluck sprang from his seat, walked up to the speaker, and, looking him full in the face, replied: "It is the custom in Germany, Monsieur, to rise only for those whom one esteems." Then, turning to Sophie, he added: "Since I perceive, Mademoiselle, that you are not mistress in your own house, I leave you and shall return no more." With which he picked up his hat and stalked out.

Gluck wanted to challenge the prince to a duel, but, being assured that such a step would be useless, as the latter would certainly shelter himself behind his rank and refuse to fight with a musician, took counsel with his friend and admirer the Duc de Nivernais. That nobleman, whom Lord Chesterfield had once held up to his son as a model for him to form himself upon, was now in his sixty-eighth year, notwithstanding which he at once constituted himself the composer's champion, and informed M. d'Hénin that he must either apologise to Gluck or fight him (the duke). In the meanwhile, the story had reached Marie Antoinette—now Queen—who sent a peremptory order to the prince to make reparation to her injured *protégé*, under pain of her displeasure. The latter, reflecting that even if he escaped the sword of the duke, who handled one as neatly as he composed verses, he would undoubtedly be exiled, had

no choice but to obey, and, with a very bad grace, called upon Gluck and made the *amende honorable*.

*Orphée et Eurydice* was produced on August 2 and met with a success surpassing even that of *Iphigénie*. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of Sophie. The friendly critic of the *Mercure* declares that "she acted and sang with much soul, intelligence, and correctness"; but the general opinion seems to have been that her display was decidedly inferior to that which she had given in the previous opera. This impression is, no doubt, partly to be accounted for by the fact that she was on this occasion somewhat overshadowed by Legros, who, Grimm tell us, "sang the principal rôle with so much fire, taste, and sentiment, that it was difficult to recognise him." At the same time, it is evident that her voice was no longer equal to the strain of any very exacting part, especially if, as was now very frequently the case, she happened to be in indifferent health.

In the early days of January 1775, *Iphigénie*, in which Gluck had made several alterations, was revived and received with even more enthusiasm than on its first production. All the artistes resumed their old parts, and Sophie's rendering of the heroine was again loudly applauded. She did not, however, enjoy her success for long, as, after a few performances, she resigned her part to Mlle. Laguerre, who in March fell ill and was, in her turn, replaced by Rosalie Levasseur.

Sophie's health, at this time, would appear to have been far from satisfactory. Any way, she did not sing again for more than ten months, and thus took no part in *Cythère assiégée*, a light opera first produced in 1759, and now reconstructed by Gluck, at the request of Marie Antoinette. The libretto was by Favart, and the incon-

gruity between his light and playful style and the solemn and pathetic music of the composer caused the piece to be very coldly received.

At the beginning of December, Sophie reappeared in the rôle of Adèle in *Adèle de Pontbieu*, a part which she had successfully created three years before, and might have repeated the triumph she had then secured, but for an unfortunate incident which occurred on the first night.

Louis XVI.'s younger brother, the Comte d'Artois (afterwards Charles X.)—a very different person in those days from the gloomy and Jesuit-ridden old monarch of 1830—attended the performance, and, from the shelter of his private box, proceeded, as was his wont, to ogle and make signs to the actresses upon the stage. Presently he cast “a benevolent glance” upon Mlle. Arnould, when that lady so far forgot the respect due to the visitor's exalted rank as to smile familiarly in his direction, “exactly as she might have done to a comrade or a lover.” The audience, the chronicler tell us, was inexpressibly shocked at the lady's behaviour, and “testified its indignation in a manner that was humiliating to her.”<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, Gluck was at work upon his *Alceste*, and Sophie had every reason to believe that, after her brilliant triumph in *Iphigénie* and her very successful rendering of the part of Eurydice, she would again be cast for the principal rôle. But alas! a bitter disappointment was in store for her.

We have mentioned that Rosalie Levasseur was the mistress of Mercy-Argenteau, the Austrian Ambassador at the French Court. Shrewd and capable though Mercy was in everything relating to his professional duties—the manner in which he had succeeded in keeping

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, viii. 321.



the peace, and all that it involved, between Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry, during the last years of the late King's reign was a perfect masterpiece of diplomacy—in love, he appears to have been as foolish as any of the gilded youths who haunted the *coulisses* of the Opera and the Comédie-Française. The fair Rosalie exercised the most absolute ascendancy over him—a fact which was the more astonishing, as all Paris knew that she had an *amant de cœur*, in the person of Nicolet, the clown. Mercy, in fact, could deny her nothing, and even carried his infatuation so far as to purchase for her a barony of the Holy Roman Empire, with a considerable revenue ; while, on another occasion, he condescended to bribe Larrivée, whose singing in a certain opera the young lady found was quite eclipsing her own, not to put forth his full powers.<sup>1</sup>

Now, Rosalie had set her heart upon supplanting Sophie and filling the principal part in the forthcoming opera, and called upon her lover to assist her to realise her ambition. First, she suggested—or persuaded Mercy to suggest—that Gluck should take up his quarters in her house, in the Rue des Fossoyeurs-Saint-Germain, and give her singing-lessons ; a proposal to which the composer, who, besides being an Austrian subject, was under considerable obligations to the Ambassador, who, with Marie Antoinette, had been mainly instrumental in bringing him to Paris, readily consented. Next, she induced him to teach her the music of *Alceste* and took care to show herself a docile as well as an industrious pupil. Finally, she hinted pretty plainly that he ought to entrust her with the title-part when the opera was

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *L'Académie royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* : Article, 'Levasseur.'

produced, pointing out that, though she might lack the histrionic ability of Mlle. Arnould, her voice was fresher and more powerful, to say nothing of the advantage which the composer would derive from having the part rendered exactly as he desired, whereas the elder actress would very probably insist on rendering it in conformity with her own ideas.

These arguments were, it is needless to say, warmly seconded by Mercy; and Gluck, who was anxious to please the amorous diplomatist, and in whose mind the insult he had received from Sophie's titular protector perhaps still rankled, after some hesitation, yielded to their wishes.

"Gluck," says the composer's French biographer, Desnoiresterres, "was wanting in gratitude towards Mlle. Arnould, so charming, so passionate in *Iphigénie*, so pathetic still, though somewhat eclipsed by Legros, in *Orphée*." At the same time, he points out that Gluck would never have superseded Sophie had he thought that the change would prejudice his work, and that the event proved that he had not over-estimated the talents of Rosalie Levasseur, who, in the part of Alceste, "displayed much art and sensibility."<sup>1</sup>

Poor Sophie seems to have borne her disappointment, notwithstanding that she could hardly have failed to see in it the end of her own dramatic career, with praiseworthy equanimity, merely observing when she heard the news: "Rosalie ought certainly to have the part; she has the voice of the people." This remark was duly repeated to her triumphant rival, who retaliated by a disgusting lampoon, composed by one of her admirers named Guichard, copies of which were printed and circulated in the theatre, while others were sent to Sophie's

<sup>1</sup> *Gluck et Piccini*, p. 132.

friends. The injured lady, however, was equal to the occasion; she sent certain copies which had fallen into her hands to the journals, and turned the tables very adroitly on Mlle. Levasseur and her ally, all decent-minded persons combining to condemn such methods of warfare.

Although the dethroned prima donna wisely refrained from giving public expression to her feelings, others were not prepared to imitate her discretion. The Prince d'Hénin, who could be very bold indeed when there was no likelihood of his being called upon to fight a duel, having heard that there was some talk of giving Sophie's dressing-room at the Opera to Rosalie Levasseur, went down to the theatre and threatened to flog the unfortunate directors within an inch of their lives, if they dared to inflict such a slight upon a lady whom he honoured with his protection; the few critics who still remained faithful to the waning star condemned in unmeasured terms the selection of Mlle. Levasseur for so important a rôle in place of an actress "who had so long been, and still was, the delight of the Opera"; while the Anti-Gluckists, only too delighted to find so stout a stick wherewith to belabour the composer, raised a perfect howl of indignation.

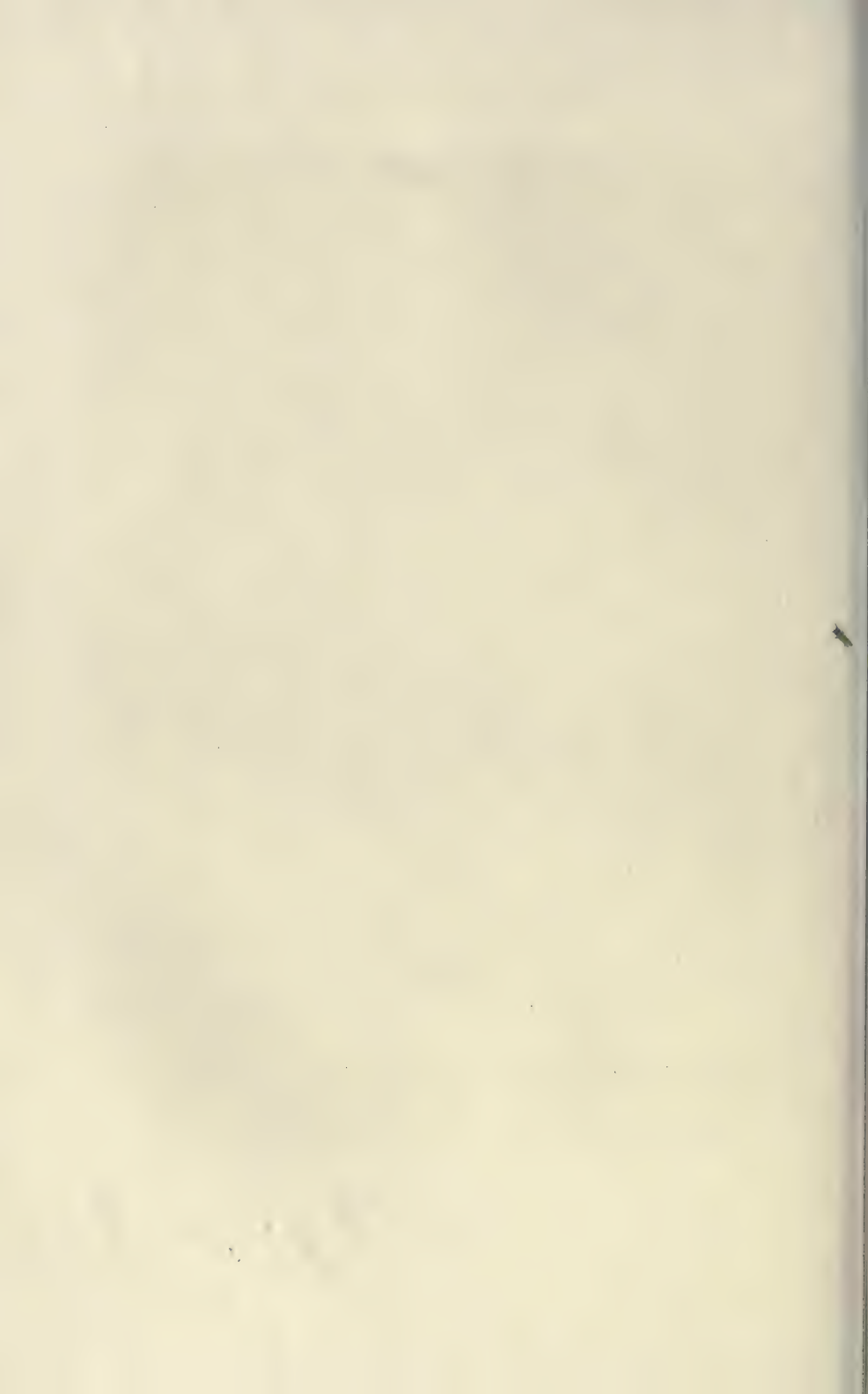
The result of all this was most unfortunate for Sophie. The contest between the Gluckists and their opponents had now reached a very acute stage, and it was the general belief of the composer's admirers that the partisans of the old school were prepared to employ the most questionable methods in order to counteract the ever-increasing popularity of the German. A rumour spread that a cabal had been formed to ensure the failure of *Alceste*, and that Sophie and her friends had joined it. There seems to have been little truth in this report, the best





SOPHIE ARNOULD

From an engraving by PRUD'HON after the drawing by CŒURÉ in the Collection  
of M. Godfrey Meyer



refutation of it being the fact that, although *Alceste* was somewhat coldly received at first, its success grew with each performance, and none at all, so far as it concerned Sophie, who, in a letter to a theatrical journal, *Le Nouveau Spectateur*, in acknowledgment of some sympathetic references to herself which had appeared in a previous issue, expressly disclaimed all hostility to Gluck or Rosalie Levasseur :

“I await with impatience your judgment on the opera of *Alceste*, which is about to interest and divide all Paris. Your views will confirm those which I myself have formed from witnessing the rehearsals only. If the success which I obtained in *Iphigénie* might have predisposed me in favour of the authors, their want of consideration, I even venture to say their bad conduct, towards me might have served to alter my opinion of them. But I have too much respect for myself to join (as these gentlemen would have people believe) in any cabal which may be formed for or against the new work. Such things I have always considered beneath me ; the former savours of *charlatanerie*, the latter of baseness. I have confined my vengeance to not asserting my right to the principal rôle.<sup>1</sup> But no personal reason will make me underrate genius, nor prevent me from rendering justice to that of M. Gluck. He is, I proclaim it aloud, the musician of the soul and master of all the modulations that express sentiment and passion, especially grief.

“As to the author of the words, I leave to the public

<sup>1</sup> By the rules of the Opera, Sophie, as senior “*actrice chantante seule*,” could have insisted, had she been so minded, on taking the part of *Alceste*. In 1774, Mlle. Duplant, who then occupied that position, claimed the title-part in *Iphigénie*, and considerable difficulty was experienced in persuading her to forego her claim, and be content with *Clytemnestra*.



the task of judging him. If I belonged to the Académie-Française, my opinion would carry as much weight as that of any other of the Forty. But I belong to the Académie Royale de Musique. I acknowledge my incompetence and my motto is: *tacet*. I will merely permit myself to say that one does not always find subjects as interesting as Iphigenia, nor models as sublime as Racine.

"In regard to the performers, if I may be allowed to speak of them, I should praise the acting of M. Gros [Legros], in the part of Admetus, and the singing of Mlle. Rosalie, in the part of Alceste.

"I have the honour to be, very perfectly, Monsieur,

"Your very humble and very obedient servant,

"SOPHIE ARNOULD."

The good effect which this letter might have produced was, unhappily, entirely discounted by a series of bitter attacks upon *Alceste*, Gluck, and Rosalie, which appeared in subsequent issues of the same journal. On the day after the first performance of the new opera, the *Nouveau Spectateur* published an anonymous letter, containing the following choice morsel of criticism:

"It seemed as if the music was being sung by invalids who had just swallowed half a pint of emetic and were making futile efforts to vomit."

This was soon followed by a second letter reproaching Gluck for having taken "a girl like Rosalie to play the part of Alceste," and several articles declaring that the opera was "more mournful than affecting," and that, in preferring Mlle. Levasseur to Mlle. Arnould, the composer showed that he "misunderstood the taste of the nation in music as well as in acting."

These letters, there can be little doubt, were the work of Lefuel de Méricourt, the editor of the journal in question, a libellous scribe of the school of Pidansat de Mairobert.<sup>1</sup> But the admirers of Gluck and the friends of Rosalie believed, or affected to believe, that, if not written, they had, at any rate, been inspired by Sophie, and thirsted for revenge.

Their opportunity arrived at the beginning of the following October, when Sophie, in the vain hope of counterbalancing the success of Rosalie in *Alceste*, created the part of Lyris in *Euthyme et Lyris*, an opera by a very mediocre composer named Desormery. The theatre became the battlefield of the contending factions. The Anti-Gluckists and the personal friends of Sophie crowded to the Palais-Royal and loudly acclaimed the singer ; but the opposition came in even greater numbers, and the applause was drowned in a tempest of groans, hisses, and cat-calls.

Marie Antoinette heard of the scenes which were nightly taking place at the theatre, and, though herself an enthusiastic supporter of Gluck, was indignant at the treatment accorded an actress whose talent she had often admired. She determined to come to her assistance and, therefore, visited the Opera on two or three occasions and warmly applauded Sophie. On the evenings on which she was present the opposition was silent, but the next the hissing and hooting broke out with redoubled violence, rather intensified than otherwise by the Queen's intervention. "To-day," we read in the *Mémoires secrets*, "the Queen being no longer

<sup>1</sup> In October of that year, two successive issues of this worthy's organ were confiscated by the police, on account of the scandalous attacks upon certain members of the theatrical profession which they contained.

present to intimidate the pit, the partisans of the Chevalier Gluck arrived in force and completely overwhelmed Mlle. Arnoux (*sic*) with the hisses which they had spared her at the previous performance. She also sang badly. One does not believe that she will dare to continue to present herself to the eyes of the public, and especially to its ears; and perhaps this humiliation will mark the period of a definite retirement, to which the weakness of her voice ought to have determined her ere this."<sup>1</sup>

The writer of the above paragraph was, no doubt, actuated by personal hostility to the actress; but, at the same time, it was only too true that Sophie's voice was failing rapidly. Early in March 1777, *Iphigénie en Aulide* was again revived, and Sophie reappeared in the part which she had created so brilliantly. She was now, however, manifestly unequal to the effort required of her, and seemed to have altogether lost her old power of holding the audience enthralled. "The public," she had once observed, "behaves to actresses like Love to warriors; it has no consideration for an old soldier"; and she herself is a particularly painful illustration of the truth of her own axiom, at least, so far as it concerns the Parisian playgoers of the eighteenth century. Forgetting the many triumphs of the woman who had for nearly twenty years been its idol, the public seemed to see before it only a performer who had committed the unpardonable offence of disappointing its expectations, and joined with the Gluckists and the personal enemies of the actress in expressing its disgust. Sophie was relentlessly hissed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, ix. 230.

<sup>2</sup> La Harpe relates that in the scene where Iphigenia says to Achilles "*Vous brûlez que je sois partie*," the pit applied the words to the actress and burst into ironical applause.



Again the Queen attempted to stem the tide of public feeling by attending the theatre and applauding the unfortunate singer. But Marie Antoinette was now fast losing what popularity she had once enjoyed with the Parisians, and even her presence and example "did not prevent the malcontents from continuing their indecent manœuvres."

It is not easy to understand why Sophie, who, in the heyday of her success, had often absented herself from the theatre for months together, merely from indolence or caprice, should have continued to appear on the stage, in the face of these hostile demonstrations. The only explanation which her biographers can find is that she had recently concluded with the directors of the Opera a fresh arrangement, whereby, in lieu of the regular salary which she hitherto received, she was to be paid the sum of five louis for each performance, and that, since she is known to have been at this time in pecuniary difficulties, she endured the taunts of the public for the sake of the money.

For our own part, we are inclined to think that, though financial considerations may not have been without their effect upon her decision, her chief reason was a very different one. Sophie was a courageous and high-spirited woman; she knew that the demonstrations against her were prompted far more by personal animosity than by the failure of her powers, and she was determined not to allow her enemies the satisfaction of boasting that they had driven her from the stage.

The malice of her foes, however, pursued her even outside the theatre. She was hissed while performing at a concert given by the Duc and Duchesse de Chartres. She was driven, one day, from the garden of the Palais-Royal, by an ill-bred youth, who, on recognising her,

began to sing the air from *Alceste* : “ *Caron t’appelle, entend sa voix !* ” Even Lefuel de Méricourt abandoned her, and in an article in his precious journal, “ regretted the loss of a part of her physical gifts by an actress who had been so long the idol of the public.”

At length, at the beginning of June 1778, Sophie decided to retire from the stage. She continued to sing from time to time at the Concerts of Sacred Music, at benefit performances, and in private theatres ; but at the Opera her name was definitely placed on the retired list. For her services at the theatre, she received a pension of 2000 livres, and one of the same amount in her quality as Court singer. This, as pensions went in those days, must be considered liberal treatment and compares very favourably with the lot of the actors and actresses of the Comédie-Française, who, even after thirty years’ service, only received a pension of 1500 livres. Mlle. Clairon, the greatest *tragédienne* of her time, on her retirement in 1766, after twenty-two years on the stage, had to rest content with one of 1000 livres.

Now began for Sophie Arnould a life very different from that to which she had so long been accustomed. Youth, beauty, and fame were gone, and with them her lovers too, for, soon after her retirement from the stage, the Prince d’Hénin deserted her for Mlle. Raucourt, of the Comédie-Française, whom Sophie had generously taken to live with her, and endeavoured to protect against the hostility of the public.<sup>1</sup>

One thing, however, still remained to her—her wit, which, if it were powerless to retain her wealthy and aristocratic admirers, sufficed to draw to her salon men

<sup>1</sup> See p. 170 *infra*.

whose friendship was infinitely to be preferred. Poets, philosophers, encyclopædists, dramatists were all at home in the house of Sophie Arnould. Diderot and d'Alembert were among her most frequent guests; Helvétius, who had once, for a brief period, been very near and dear to her, remained one of her greatest friends; Beaumarchais delighted in an *assaut d'esprit* with his witty hostess; Rulhière came and brought with him Jean Jacques Rousseau; Marmontel, Duclos, Favart, Linguet, and a host of lesser lights made her salon one of their favourite rendezvous; that most affable of literary noblemen, the Prince de Ligne, seldom failed to make his appearance there whenever he happened to visit the French capital, and Voltaire himself—King Voltaire—when he came to Paris in 1778, to enjoy at last the triumph of his renown at its centre—and to die—condescended to call upon Sophie.

The day and hour of the great man's visit were duly notified to Sophie, who, knowing what kind of a reception would please him, collected a band of children, headed by her own little daughter, Alexandrine, who, the moment Voltaire entered the room, sprang forward and proceeded to hug and kiss him. The Patriarch was delighted. "You wish to kiss me," said he laughing, "and I have no face left!"

After conversing with Sophie for some time, the poet remarked: "Ah, Mademoiselle! I am eighty-four years old, and I have committed eighty-four follies."

"A mere trifle," replied Sophie consolingly; "I am not yet forty, and I have committed a thousand!"

That same year, Mesmer visited Paris, professing to cure all diseases by means of animal magnetism, and speedily became the doctor *à la mode*. Some of Sophie's



friends advised her to consult him, but, as she did not happen to have any need of his professional services herself, she sent her lap-dog instead, declaring that, if he could cure that pampered animal, who had been ailing for some time past, presumably as the result of a too generous diet, she would believe in him. Mesmer, anxious to prove that the success of his system was not dependent upon the credulity of the patient, undertook the case, and, in a few days, returned the dog, with the assurance that it was now in the best of health. Sophie thereupon wrote him a letter of thanks, which the doctor sent to the journals. He soon, however, had cause to regret this step, for, four days later, the dog died, much to the joy of the sceptics, who asked Sophie what could have induced her to give the German a testimonial so little deserved. "I have nothing to reproach myself with," she replied; "the poor animal died in excellent health."

When Sophie retired from the stage, she was apparently in possession of what most members of her profession, in those days, would have considered a very comfortable income, as from a packet of letters published for the first time by M. Henri Gauthier-Villars, in *La Nouvelle Revue* (February 1897), we learn that her notary, a certain M. Alleaume, was in the habit of paying her fifty louis a month, out of the moneys she was supposed to lodge in his hands.<sup>1</sup> The maintenance and

<sup>1</sup> In addition to her pensions, she had 2000 livres a year from a settlement made upon her by Lauraguais, and owned a house at Port-à-l'Anglais, which she sold, some months after her retirement from the stage, for 20,000 livres. From a letter to Alleaume, written apparently during the winter of 1775-1776, we learn that she was then in receipt of allowances from at least two more of her noble lovers; 4250 livres from the Prince de Conti, and 3250 from the Prince de Condé; but how long these payments were continued it is impossible to say.

education of her three children, however, seems to have involved her in considerable expense, while during her long years of prosperity she had acquired such extravagant habits that her income was quite inadequate for her needs, and she was, in consequence, continually in pecuniary difficulties. Her letters to Alleaume, indeed, are almost without exception demands for money, in which she brings all her persuasive powers to bear upon the stern man of business, in the hope of inducing him to unlock his cash-box and advance her "her month."

"Well, *petit père* Alleaume," she writes, "I never see you now, and I ask myself why?—why this difference to poor Sophie?—for it is not kind of you to avoid the poor people who love you. You will reply to that: 'But it is you who never see me, unless you have something to ask.'

"Wait and see if I never ask for anything, unless I visit you. Here for example: Will you please advance me my month? for I am absolutely without funds.

"Will *petit père* Alleaume remain inflexible for four days to the request of Sophie?"

And again:

"I swear to you, though you may be somewhat incredulous as to the state of my mind, that when you have put my little business clear and straight—I promise you, on my word as a living being, that I will think twice ere I incur the smallest expense. It is not possible for me to be miserly—it is a disgusting vice."

Then, in a third letter:

"Eh! *bon jour*, my good friend; it is an age since I saw you or embraced you. When are you going to spend a morning with me? Do you know that I have learned a good deal of sense since the beginning of the year?

Do you know that I intend to keep my word and commit hardly any foolish extravagance ; and you will see that you will be very satisfied with poor Sophie. If you knew how many small debts I have discharged, you would be well content with your Sophie. I have not yet got into my den (at Port-à-l'Anglais), but so soon as I have, I should like to meet you, and talk over all this business at our leisure. If, in the meanwhile, you would like to come this evening and eat a truffled turkey, much bigger and a thousand times more of a *dinde* than I am, you will be welcome."

In spite of these promises of amendment, we find her, shortly afterwards, writing to inform the worthy notary that an execution has been levied upon her for non-payment of her capitation tax and other dues, and to beg him to send her the sum of 196 livres to enable her to get rid of the emissaries of the law.

As time goes on, the letters multiply, all full of entreaties, excuses, promises, regrets, expostulations. She assures him that she cares nothing for money—one can well believe that—but has an intense desire to be free from debt. Then, when he shows a marked disinclination to make any further advances, she declares that not even on the stage of the Opera has she met with so inhuman, so hard-hearted, a monster. But the notary, annoyed at finding that her promises are never kept, and that, notwithstanding her protestations, she makes no change in her extravagant way of living, shuts himself up in his office and turns a deaf ear to her appeals. Sophie redoubles her entreaties, reiterates her vows of amendment, sends him epistles bedewed with her tears. All is in vain ; *petit père* Alleaume remains inflexible.

In November 1780, Sophie's daughter, Alexandrine,



married a certain André de Murville, a young man of respectable middle-class family, who dabbled in literature. Alexandrine was, at this time, only in her fourteenth year; an ungainly, red-haired child, who seems to have inherited both her mother's biting wit and—or, at least, so scandal asserted—her mother's indifference to the conventions of morality.<sup>1</sup> For which reasons, Sophie was probably glad to be rid of her. The ceremony took place at Saint-Roch, and was attended by several worthy bourgeois couples, relatives of Murville, who must have been considerably shocked when Sophie, on being presented to them, remarked upon the strangeness of the circumstance that the mother of the bride should be the only unmarried lady present.<sup>2</sup>

For the next few years, we hear little of Sophie. She appears, like so many women of her class, to have endeavoured to find consolation in devotion, but soon gave up the attempt, protesting that the directors of conscience were worse than the directors of the Opera. By the bankruptcy of the Prince de Guéménée, in 1782, she lost a considerable part of her fortune—how we are not told—a disaster which probably accounts for the fact that she soon afterwards quitted Paris and took a little house at Clichy-la-Garenne, “with an acre of land, which, however, she did not cultivate.” Here, in 1785, she was joined by her daughter, whose marriage had turned out very unhappily, and who was now suing for a separation, on the ground of her husband's cruelty.

In her plaint, which bears date October 19, 1795,

<sup>1</sup> The antiquary Millin, who annotated a copy of *Arnoldiana* which afterwards came into the Goncourts' possession, asserts that she had had tender relations with the Comte d'Artois and “my lord” Stuart.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. R. B. Douglas, “Sophie Arnould: actress and wit,” p. 209.

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Alexandrine declares that "since she had had the misfortune to espouse the sieur Murville, she had never known a moment's peace"; that he had "several times struck her at the end of frightful scenes"; that she had been forced to make over to him all the moneys that had been settled upon her, and that she was now "sick, destitute, and in urgent need of medical assistance to prevent the loss of an eye, which her husband had grievously injured at the risk of killing her."

In a second plaint, made the following year, she relates that, a few days after the birth of her first child, towards whose support he now refused to contribute, her husband had called her atrocious names, seized her violently by the right arm, "with such force as to leave a red mark," and, finally, turned her out of the house, at one o'clock in the morning.

About the same time, the unhappy Alexandrine applied to the Minister of the King's Household for admission to the Opera in the humble capacity of a chorus-singer; but, for some reason, her request does not appear to have been granted.

At Clichy, Sophie lived a very quiet life, though she seems to have been fond of entertaining her humble neighbours. "I went sometimes to see Mlle. Arnould, at Clichy," writes Millin. "One day, I found her in the midst of a large circle. There were twenty persons at table. I was on the point of retiring, when she called me back and said to me: 'Come in! I am marrying the son of my cook to the daughter of my gardener. Both families are my guests; we are celebrating the pleasures of Love and Equality.' In the evening, her two sons arrived. They wanted money. She had none to give them. 'Ah, well!' said she, 'each of you take

a horse from the stable.' And they went away with the two horses."<sup>1</sup>

The expenses of her family—she had now to support Alexandrine and her two children, in addition to her sons—pressed heavily upon poor Sophie, and, in January 1788, we find her writing to one of her old friends, a financier of the name of Boutin, begging him to arrange for her a loan of 24,000 livres, which she proposes to repay by four yearly instalments of 6000 livres. As security, she offers a mortgage on her house at Clichy, which, she declares, is worth 20,000 francs, and another on the furniture of a house belonging to her in the Rue Caumartin, and assures him that she will keep her promise to repay the money "with certainty, honour, and probity."

She appears to have obtained the accommodation she sought, but was speedily in difficulties again, and compelled to apply for assistance to some of her old friends, whom, when they sent her money, or even "evinced an intention to oblige her," she overwhelms with gratitude, declaring that, if it be true, as learned men assert, that the soul never perishes, her own will remember the obligation, even after death.

Yet, harassed though she was, she could sympathise with the distress of others. On January 21, 1789, a young man of the name of Bompas was arrested at the Barrière de Clichy, with three parcels in his possession, containing a large quantity of lady's underwear, "marked with the letters S.A. in red cotton," a porcelain mustard-pot, a green morocco case holding two decanters and a crystal goblet, two pairs of candlesticks, and various other articles. On being brought before a commissary of

<sup>1</sup> Cited by the Goncourts, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 132.



police, he confessed that the above-mentioned articles were the property of Mlle. Arnould, whose residence he had burglariously entered the previous evening. Sophie caused inquiries to be made and, finding that Bompas was a journeyman carpenter of hitherto irreproachable character, who had been out of work for several weeks and had been driven to the theft by necessity, generously declined to prosecute, and the prisoner was accordingly released.

Several writers have stated that, in the early days of the Revolution, Sophie's salon became a political club and that she herself was an enthusiastic advocate of republican doctrines. "There are beings," wrote Champenetz, in the course of a brutal attack on the ex-singer which he published in the royalist organ, *La Chronique scandaleuse*, "who would not die content unless they had degraded themselves in every conceivable way. Of this the aged Sophie Arnould is an example. After delivering herself for forty years to every scoundrel of bad taste, she has now turned demagogue, that she may receive at her house the dregs of the human race. She has sent to study at the Jacobins the two children, with whom a man of gallantry once presented her, through inadvertence."<sup>1</sup>

That Sophie, in common with her old lover Lauragais and others of her aristocratic and literary friends, sympathised to a certain extent with the Revolution—that is to say, with the Revolution in its earlier phases—is probable enough. That, crippled as she was with debts, she kept open house for all the turbulent spirits of her time, or carried her partisanship so far as to endeavour

<sup>1</sup> *La Chronique scandaleuse*, No. 29, cited by E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 149.

to influence the opinions of her sons, who were quite old enough to form them without any assistance from their mother, as Champcenetz—an old enemy, by the way, of both Sophie and Lauraguais—asserts, we beg leave to doubt. Any way, her enthusiasm for the new order of things must have been very short-lived, for, in 1789, her pension of 4000 livres was reduced to 2000, and from 1793 not paid at all, but, according to an entry in the Archives, “left owing.”

In 1790, Sophie sold her house at Clichy-la-Garenne and purchased, “for a mere song,” an old disused priory at Luzarches. Her new residence she christened *Le Paraclet*, though whether she derived much comfort from the house itself is open to question, as it was in the last stage of dilapidation, and she had no money to spare for even the most urgent repairs. In an amusing letter, written in 1794 to Belanger, she describes it as “only the carcase of a house, which waits for doors and windows until it shall please God to send me the means,” and adds that she is “camping provisionally in the dovecot of the ancient monks.”

Her surroundings, however, appear to have afforded her some compensation for the ruinous condition of the building. “I have a beautiful park, containing all that it is possible to desire whether for ornament or use; superb kitchen-garden; a vineyard, which has yielded me this year six hogsheads of wine; a forest, a wood, an orchard, a pond well stocked with fish, fresh air, beautiful scenery, good land. This is the fourth year that I have been here, and I remain in the greatest solitude. But well! I have not felt one moment’s *ennui* since I came.”

While at Luzarches, Sophie received a domiciliary

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visit from the local revolutionary committee. She received them with a smiling face, though she must have been quaking with fear, since her intimacy with the Prince de Condé and other distinguished *émigrés* was sufficient to have sent her to the guillotine a dozen times over.

"I have always been a very active citizen," said she; "I know the Rights of Man by heart" (a remark which was certainly true), "and I have sung twenty years at the Opéra-National for the pleasure of the Sovereign People."

The committee, however, were not satisfied with these assurances and insisted on ransacking the house, in quest of compromising correspondence and so forth. Presently they came across a bust of Gluck and paused before it.

"It is Marat," said Sophie, in a tone of the deepest veneration.

The worthy *sans-culottes* uncovered, and convinced that they had just been contemplating the august features of the father of the people, whose sanguinary career the knife of Charlotte Corday had recently brought to an abrupt termination, retired, with many apologies for having doubted the patriotism of the Citoyenne Arnould.<sup>1</sup>

Sophie remained at Luzarches for seven years, "*tout à fait en paysanne*." She wore *sabots*, she planted cabbages, she gathered peas and apples, and she reared,

<sup>1</sup> According to another account, to which the Goncourts and Mr. R. B. Douglas both give credence, it was a bust of Sophie herself, by Houdon, representing her as Iphigenia; and the agents of the revolutionary committee "mistook a sky-blue band on which was painted a quarter-moon and two stars for the scarf of Marat." But is not this making rather a severe call upon our credulity?



or tried to rear, poultry. Her daughter Alexandrine lived with her for a couple of years, and then took advantage of the new law of divorce to get rid of the estimable Murville and replace him by the son of the local postmaster, "a stout boy, who was quite unsuitable for her." Sophie, though, as we have seen, by no means strait-laced herself, strongly disapproved of her daughter's conduct, and made it the occasion of one of her most celebrated *bons mots*. "Divorce," she gravely observed, "is the sacrament of adultery."

All this time the unfortunate woman was gradually becoming poorer and poorer. Her pension had been discontinued; the greater part of what money she had possessed apart from that seems to have been swallowed up, with so many other fortunes, in the financial chaos which accompanied the political one; while to apply to her friends for help was no longer of any avail. Not a few of them, among whom was the Prince d'Hénin, had departed to another world, by way of the Place de la Révolution; others, like Lauraguais, were in exile; those who were still within reach of her appeals were ruined. Of all her old friends and admirers the only one to whom she could turn was Belanger, and it was but little that he could do to assist his once-adored Sophie. He himself had been imprisoned and had narrowly escaped the guillotine, and when he was released, to find that everything portable belonging to him had been carried off by a faithless servant, he was thrust, *bon gré mal gré*, into a miserably-paid municipal office, which kept him hard at work from seven o'clock in the morning until nearly midnight, and left him no time for practising his profession. Moreover, he was now married, having, while in prison, espoused a companion in misfortune,

Mlle. Dervieux, of the Opera, who had been a notorious courtesan, and, consequently, had no money to spare for old friends in distress.

Nevertheless, the kind-hearted architect did all that was in his power. He wrote to Sophie; he went to visit her; he entertained her at his house, and acted as her intermediary with the Minister of the Interior, in order to secure the restitution of the pension to which she was entitled. And Sophie, on her side, makes him the confidant of all her hopes and disappointments, and writes him long, affectionate letters, beginning: "*Mon bel ange*," and one of them superscribed, "*À mon meilleur ami*."

Once, learning that she was in sore distress, Belanger sent her a double louis—probably all that the poor man could afford—which the grateful Sophie acknowledges in the following letter:

"8 Nivôse, Year viii. (January 29, 1800).

"Ah, *mon bel ange*, my friend, you are always the same for goodness and generosity. What a good heart is yours! I would thank you sincerely, my poor friend, but what expressions can I employ? . . . They would always fall short of my gratitude, not for the money, but for the action. Ah! what good you have done my heart! Here are a hundred years of happiness for me, if I had them to live. Console yourself, my friend; I have still a few sous, and have no need of the two louis that you sent me, and of which you have deprived yourself for me; for I also know what your position is. But I will keep *this piece* to wear upon my heart, and it shall not leave me until my death. I know the motto I shall put there; it shall be my relic. Good-bye, *mon bel ange*, my good angel, my true friend. Believe

me there does not exist on earth a being who is more tenderly attached to you, and more inviolably attached to you, than your

“SOPHIE ARNOULD.

“On the 24th, I shall be with my good friends, with you and your wife, and shall devote that day to my happiness.”

In another letter, written eleven months later, we find her rejoicing over the victory of Hohenlinden, in which “her son in the army, her hussar, had well avenged them with the army of the Rhine against the Austrians.” She has received details of the engagement from Constant himself, who sends many affectionate messages to his “good and tender mother” and the Belangers, and desires to be remembered to “the amiable ladies of their circle.” The hastily-scribbled notes of the hussar, who seems to have been both a good son and a brave and capable officer—he rose, as we have mentioned elsewhere, to the rank of colonel and fell at Wagram—seem to have been one of the chief consolations of poor Sophie’s life.

When the first of the above letters was written, Sophie had been living for some years in Paris. She had returned to the capital in 1797, and had at first taken lodgings over a barber’s shop in the Rue du Petit-Lion, from which, however, she had removed, a few months later, to an apartment in the Hôtel d’Angivilliers. She still retained possession of the old priory at Luzarches, and appears to have occasionally visited it.

From the Hôtel d’Angivilliers, we find her writing to Lauraguais, who, though he had contrived to save his head,<sup>1</sup> was now almost as poor as she herself was, and

<sup>1</sup> According to Castil-Blaze, during the Reign of Terror, Lauraguais disguised himself as a coachman and drove a *fiacre*.



was living on a small farm which he had bought or rented at Manicamp, in the department of the Aisne. He had invited her to share his retreat, but Sophie felt obliged to decline the offer. She had succeeded, not without great difficulty, in obtaining from François de Neufchâteau, the Minister of the Interior, a pension of 200 livres a month, and, as pensions were paid very grudgingly, she feared that her leaving Paris might serve as an excuse for discontinuing it. Unable to join Lauraguais in the country, she now invites him to come and live with her, "as to end her days near him, to render him all the attentions of friendship, of the most tender, the most constant attachment, is the desire of her heart and will crown her happiness." "One must have money, you will say," she continues, after pointing out that Paris will be the safest place for him to be in, in the coming renewal of the faction strife, which she believes to be close at hand. "But you have *a little*, and I have *a little* also. We shall not have any great expenses to meet. No rent to pay; we must breakfast at home; for dinner we can visit our friends; we will be moderate at their houses and very moderate at our own. I have also some wood at Le Paraclet, a portion of which I will have brought here. . . . As to our means of living; well, my Dorval, we must help one another. We will take for our models Baucis and Philemon. Dorval will write the great adventures of the Revolution; I will transmit to posterity those of our youth. That is already a long time ago, but one never forgets what has moved one deeply. The heart alone, my Dorval, has imperishable recollections. . . . I shall prepare for you all that I can procure for your needs and comfort. You shall have a fine room, very large and airy and in a good position, where you

will be alone and free, with a staircase and door to yourself, a good bed, chairs and commodes to match, a big table for your papers, writing materials, &c. Finally, I hope you will not be uncomfortable. As for other matters, I have all that is required. To assist me, I keep one servant, a woman about thirty years of age, unmarried, and not too intelligent, but who works well and is a great help to me. The intelligent ones are only *intrigantes*, &c. We must avoid all that, and for good reasons. But do not, my friend, be uneasy about yourself; I shall always be at your service, and shall always say :

“ ‘ Ah ! qu'on est heureux de déchausser ce qu'on aime ! ’ ”

“ Adieu. I will let you know when the lodging will be ready. That will not be long ; and do not send any excuses for not coming. Adieu.”

Lauraguais did not see his way to accept this invitation, but he appears to have been residing in Paris, for some time at least, during the last year or two of Sophie's life, and to have done what little he could to assist her.

The poverty in which poor Sophie spent the last years of her life was in a great measure the result of her own goodness of heart. Soon after she removed from Luzarches to Paris, her daughter Alexandrine died, leaving behind her three children totally unprovided for. The ex-singer heroically undertook the charge of her grandchildren, although she must have been aware that the cost of their maintenance would leave her with hardly sufficient to procure the barest necessities. Still, by the aid of the most rigid economy, she contrived to support both herself and them until the summer of 1799, when François de Neufchâteau resigned office, and the pension he had accorded her was discontinued. The

unfortunate woman was now almost penniless—it was at this time that Belanger sent her the double louis which called forth the letter of thanks we have already cited. Nevertheless, even when face to face with starvation, her wit did not desert her, as will be seen by the following letter, which she addressed to Lucien Bonaparte, the new Minister of the Interior :

PARIS, 1 *Pluviôse*, Year viii. (January 21, 1801).

“CITIZEN MINISTER,—I am called Sophie Arnould ; a name perhaps quite unknown to you, but formerly very familiar to the Theatre of the Gods.

‘Je chantais, ne vous déplaîse.’

. . . Since my earliest years, and without any other destiny than the chance which governs so many things, twenty years of my life have been consecrated to the *Théâtre des Arts*,<sup>1</sup> where some natural talents, a careful education, and the most artistic teaching were supported by the counsels of men of taste, scholars, artists, in a word, of persons justly celebrated. As for myself, I had then to recommend me, a suitable physique, an abundant youth, vivacity, soul, a bad head, and a good heart. These were the auspices under which I was fortunate enough to make my life illustrious, and to gain, together with a sort of celebrity, glory, fortune, and many friends. Alas ! now Chance has turned against me. As for celebrity, my name is still cited with some praise in association with those of *Psyché*, *Thélaïre*, *Iphigénie*, *Églé*, *Pomone*, in a word, at the *Théâtre des Arts*. As for the friends, I can only say that I so well deserved them that I have only lost those whom death has taken from me, and those of whom the decemviral axe has deprived me.

<sup>1</sup> The official Republican name for the Opera.



There is thus only inconstant Fortune which, without rhyme or reason, has given me the slip . . . and in what circumstances too ! . . . When I am too old for Love and too young for Death. You see then, Citizen Minister, how cruel it is, after so much happiness, to find oneself reduced to so miserable a state, and, after having kindled so many fires, to be to-day without even a log to burn on my own hearth ! For the fact is that, since the nation has placed me on its Pension List, I have nowhere to sleep and nothing to live on. I assuredly do not ask for riches, but only for enough to enable me to finish my life and to avoid an unhappy old age. I have heavy expenses, because, in my fortunate days, I was the support of the unfortunate members of my family. That had to be, but my poverty does not make them rich. Finally, Citizen Minister, I beg you to come to my assistance and to continue those benefits which my friend, François de Neufchâteau, when he became Minister, procured for me. I owe this testimony to his heart. . . .

“ SOPHIE ARNOULD.”

Lucien Bonaparte's reply to this letter was to promise Sophie a free benefit at the Opera. He subsequently, however, withdrew this permission, at the same time announcing his intention to make her, by way of compensation, a grant of 6000 francs. But, in the then depleted state of the Treasury, many months frequently intervened between a promise and its performance ; and the poor woman could only obtain a portion of the money. Her condition was now pitiable, since not only was she living in extreme poverty, but her health was failing rapidly. An accident which she had met with some time before had induced a malignant growth which defied

medical treatment, and occasioned her terrible suffering. In her distress, she begged Belanger to write to the Minister, and the architect addressed to Lucien Bonaparte the following pathetic letter :

II *Messidor, Year x. (June 30, 1802).*

“CITIZEN MINISTER,—I address this letter to you alone. It is written from the bedside of the celebrated Arnould, who is now on the point of death. [She did not die until four months later.] This woman is dying in want of the necessaries which her state of distress does not permit her to procure. You accorded her a benefit performance at the Théâtre des Arts, for which some obliging persons offered her 12,000 francs. You subsequently desired that this permission should be withdrawn and, in exchange, offered her 6000 francs. She has only received 4000. The 2000 which are still due would be of the greatest service to her ; but to whom am I to address myself to obtain the fulfilment of your promise ? The treasurer of the Théâtre des Arts declares that he must have a special order from you, and that, without such order, he can hand over nothing. And this unhappy woman, of whom Gluck said : ‘Without the charm of the voice and elocution of Mlle. Arnould, my *Iphigénie* would never have been accepted in France’—this unfortunate woman finds herself to-day deprived even of the means of prolonging her life, for want of assistance ! What would the Moncrifs, the Rousseaus, the d’Alemberts, the Diderots, Helvétius, the Baron d’Holbach, and all those celebrated men who so courted her society (as you may find in their correspondence) have said to this ? What would Voltaire himself have said ? he who, at the age of eighty-four, had himself carried

to her house, and inscribed these verses on her bust :

“ ‘Ses grâces, ses talents ont illustré son nom ;  
Elle a su tout charmer, jusqu'à la jalousie.  
Alcibiade en elle eut cru voir Aspasic,  
Maurice, Lecouvreur, et Gourville, Ninon.’ ”

“ ‘This woman, now so utterly forsaken, was once surrounded by men of learning. She lived to help the unfortunate ; she lived to leave models and pupils to the stage, which she adorned and even created. Eminent men have immortalised her talents and her wit ; and yet this woman is dying for want of means to procure remedies for the cruel sufferings which she is enduring.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

It is believed that this letter was the means of shaming the Minister into paying the remainder of the sum due. Let us hope that such was the case, and that the money was able to procure poor Sophie some relief in her last hours. She died on Vendémiaire 30, Year xi. (October 22, 1802), having previously received the last Sacraments from the hands of the curé of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois.

She was buried the following day ; in what cemetery is uncertain. The Goncourts think it must have been at Montmartre, because all persons at this period who died in the 1<sup>er</sup> Arrondissement were interred there. But, as Mr. Douglas suggests, it is quite likely that Belanger or Lauraguais might have caused her to be buried elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> Cited by E. and J. de Goncourt, *Sophie Arnould*, p. 302.





II

MADemoisELLE GUIMARD





## II

### MADemoisELLE GuIMARD

ACCORDING to a report of a police-inspector named Marais, published for the first time in the *Revue rétrospective* (vol. viii.), the real name of this famous *danseuse* was Marie Morel, and she was the natural daughter of a Jew named Bernard, who died at the Châtelet, where he had been imprisoned for debt, and a girl named Morel, of good bourgeois family. There is no truth in this report, however, save so far as the illegitimacy of the lady is concerned, as, from the registers of the parish of Bonne-Nouvelle de Paris, it appears that she was the daughter of one Fabien Guimard, inspector of the cloth manufactories at Voiron, in Dauphiné, and of Marie Anne Bernard, and that she was born in the Rue de Bourbon-Villeneuve, December 27, 1743.<sup>1</sup> The *acte de naissance* describes Marie Anne Bernard as the *wife* of Fabien Guimard, but, though she called herself by the name of the father of her child, they were, as a matter of fact, never married, as M. Campardon discovered in the Archives Nationales a deed legitimating the *danseuse*, bearing date December 1765, without doubt consented to by Guimard, in order to secure his daughter's succession to his property.<sup>2</sup>

In this deed, the demoiselle Marie Madeleine Guimard,

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *Académie royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* : Article, "Guimard."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

making profession of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion, declares that she was born of the illegitimate connection which formerly existed between the sieur Fabien Guimard, inspector of the cloth manufactories at Voiron, and the deceased Anne Bernard, her father and mother being both then free and unmarried; but that, in the misfortune of her birth, she has had the good fortune to be educated with great care, and that her father being desirous of continuing the marks of tenderness and personal affection that he has always manifested for her, and wishing to assure her his property, has consented, in conjunction with his brother, priest and canon of the diocese of Orléans, to accord to her letters of legitimation, for the purpose of effacing the stain of her birth and giving her the enjoyment of the privileges and advantages of legitimate children.

And Louis XV., by his special grace, full power, and authority, legitimates the said demoiselle Guimard, and, in the impressive language of the ancient monarchy, declares that it is his royal will and pleasure that she shall bear the name of Marie Madeleine Guimard, that she shall be held, considered, and reputed, as he holds her, legitimate, that she shall never be reproached with her birth and that she shall enjoy, in the said quality, the same honours, prerogatives, rights, privileges, franchises, and advantages as are enjoyed by his other legitimate subjects.

In the above declaration, Madeleine speaks of her good fortune in being educated with great care, and of the marks of tenderness and personal affection she had received from her father. It would appear, however, that the act of legitimation was a tardy act of reparation on M. Guimard's part, very probably dictated by the approach of death, for his neglect of the duties of a

father, since no trace is to be found of his having exercised any supervision over his daughter's early years ; and the girl's education, or at least the choregraphic part of it, seems to have been undertaken at the expense of a M. d'Harnoncourt and the Président de Saint-Lubin, two elderly roués, whose practice it was to defray the education of young girls who happened to have caught their fancy, with a view to making them their mistresses when they should have reached a suitable age.

Whether either of these amiable old gentlemen received anything in return for his trouble is problematical, for Madeleine Guimard was ever fastidious ; but, according to that highly unedifying work, *La Police dévoilée*, the president did not sigh altogether in vain.

In those days there was a *corps de ballet* attached to the Comédie-Française, some of the performances of which, notably *La Mort d'Orphée, ou les Fêtes de Bacchus* (June 1759), and *Vertumne et Pomone* (April 1760), enjoyed a vogue comparable to the most successful ballets of the Opera itself ; and it was in this corps that Madeleine Guimard, in virtue of the double protection of M. d'Harnoncourt and the Président de Saint-Lubin, made her first appearance on the stage in 1758. She was then in her sixteenth year, and is described, in the report of the police-inspector Marais already referred to, as “ *bien faite et déjà en possession de la jolie gorge du monde, d'une figure assez bien, sans être jolie ; l'œil fripon, et portée au plaisir.* ”

Of her professional career at the national theatre we have, unfortunately, no details ; the brilliant talents which made her so celebrated in later years were probably as yet undeveloped, or, at any rate, she was afforded no



opportunity of displaying them. On the other hand, we have a good deal of information, of a somewhat unedifying nature, in regard to her private life. Her mother appears to have exercised over the young *coryphée* a commendable vigilance; nevertheless, in September 1760, the girl was detected in an amorous correspondence with a dancer of the Opera named Léger, whom, we learn from a *Plainte rendue par la mère de Mlle. Guimard, danseuse à la Comédie-Française, contre un sieur Léger, qu'elle accusait de vouloir séduire sa fille*, had introduced himself into the house, under the pretext of giving his inamorata lessons in her art.

The result of this *liaison*, if we are to believe the scandal-loving scribes of the time, was a child, to which the *danseuse* gave birth in a barn, in the midst of winter, "*sans feu et sans linge.*"<sup>1</sup> The story of the child is very probably apocryphal; at any rate, we hear nothing further about it, though, of course, it may have died in infancy. But there can be no doubt that Madeleine Guimard did live for a time with Léger, and in great poverty too; for some years later, when she had risen to fame and opulence, the poet Barthe, in his *Statuts pour l'Opéra*, alludes to the episode in the following verses:

"Que celles qui, pour prix de leurs heureux travaux,  
Jouissent à vingt ans d'un honnête opulence,  
Ont un hôtel et des chevaux,  
Se rappellent parfois leur première indigence  
Et leur petit grenier et leur lit sans rideaux.  
Leur défendons, en conséquence,  
De regarder avec pitié  
Celle qui s'en retourne à pié;

---

<sup>1</sup> *Arnoldiana*.

Pauvre enfant dont l'innocence  
N'a pas encore réussi,  
Mais qui, grâce à la danse,  
Fera son chemin aussi."<sup>1</sup>

The "widow" Guimard—the lady gave out that she was a widow, to account for the non-appearance of the inspector of cloth manufactories—was not nearly so ferocious a guardian of her daughter's honour when the *soupirant* did not happen to be a poor devil of a dancer; and when, not long afterwards, the wealthy financier, M. Bertin, of whose unfortunate connection with Sophie Arnould we have spoken in our study of that singer, appeared upon the scene and offered to furnish, for Mlle. Madeleine's accommodation, a handsome apartment near the Comédie-Française, the fond mother seems to have regarded his advances with complacency, if not with a warmer feeling.

In 1761, Mlle. Guimard quitted the Comédie-Française and accepted an engagement at the Opera, to double Mlle. Allard, at the very modest salary of 600 livres a year. Here, on May 9, 1762, she made her first appearance, in the part of Terpsichore, in the prologue of the *Fêtes Grecques et Romaines*, and obtained a great success. Her nimbleness and her grace, though at that time perhaps a little affected, gained her loud applause, which never failed her during the twenty-seven years of her theatrical career.

The year which followed her *début*, Mlle. Guimard secured a genuine success at a performance of *Castor et Pollux* before the Court, at Fontainebleau. "This young person," says the *Mercure de France*, "already known and applauded on the Paris stage, has given before

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 18.

the Court, at Fontainebleau, agreeable proofs of her progress, and particularly in the ballets of this opera, where she danced several *pas de deux*."

Every year Mlle. Guimard continued to grow in favour, with both the habitués of the Opera and at the Court. As Eglé in *Les Fêtes d'Hébé, ou Les Talents lyriques*, by Mondorge and Rameau, as Flore in *Naïs*, as an Amazon in *Tancrède*, and as the statue in *Pygmalion*, she was received with ever-increasing applause, and after her appearance in the last-named part, she was generally admitted to be one of the most brilliant *danseuses* who had ever appeared on the Paris stage.

The dance of Mlle. Guimard has been described by Noverre as the poetry of motion. It was a very simple one, consisting merely of a variety of little steps, but every movement was characterised by such exquisite grace that the public soon came to prefer her to any other performer. What, however, chiefly distinguished her from her colleagues was the fact that to her talents as a *danseuse*, she united all the qualities of an excellent actress; her countenance, her attitude, her gestures all spoke, and her dance seemed to be only the faithful and very animated expression of the sentiments which she experienced.<sup>1</sup> But let us cite on this subject, a passage from a very interesting letter written, some three years after her death, by her husband, Jean Étienne Despréaux, to a friend, who had asked him for some information about his wife and the Opera :

"There are three kinds of grace : grace of form, grace of attitude, and grace of movement. Grace of form is the gift of Nature ; it is rare. That of attitude is a choice of positions of the body, which good taste

<sup>1</sup> Castil-Blaze, *Histoire de l'Académie de Musique*, i. 267.



chooses and indicates. That of movement consists not merely in passing from one attitude to another, in following the cadence of the music, but it requires the expression to be in conformity with the *genre* that it represents, especially in the *danse terre-à-terre*, which is very different from the *danse sautée*. It is in the *danse terre-à-terre* that Mlle. Guimard charmed, for more than twenty-five years, a critical public, in the gavottes of *Armide* and in two hundred other dances. She was always new ; I do not speak only of her feet, they count for little in comparison with the charm of body and head. It is that which is the perfection of the picture. She played perfectly both comedy and *opéra-comique*. Her expressive face depicted easily all the feelings that she experienced, or was believed to experience. That was why she displayed the most perfect pantomime in *Médée et Jason*, in the ballet of *Ninette*, in *Myrza*, and in many other ballets. She was always perfect, because grace never forsook her.

"She knew how to distinguish the trivial from what was really comic, and joined to the charm of grace and of harmony of movement facial expression.

" . . . She did not approve of the present fashion of raising the foot as high as the hip. These exaggerated movements dislocate the body, and are the enemies of grace. Attitudes of this kind have no other effect than to astonish the *parterre*."<sup>1</sup>

Madeleine Guimard was not beautiful, she was not even pretty ; her complexion was unpleasantly sallow ; her thinness so extreme as to earn from her charitable colleagues of the Opera the sobriquets of "the spider," "the skeleton of the Graces," and so forth. But she

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 304 note.

more than atoned for these natural disadvantages by an indescribable charm of manner, which conquered the minds and hearts of all with whom she came in contact. "Love," says one of her biographers, "is not blind for nothing, and Madeleine Guimard possessed more than any other woman of her time the art of placing a bandage over the eyes of those who regarded her."

Her triumphs in the sphere of gallantry rivalled those which she obtained upon the stage. Not one among her contemporaries succeeded in achieving a similar notoriety. Princes of the Blood and dancers of the Opera, great noblemen and men of letters, financiers, painters, and—*O tempora! O mores!*—bishops, nay, even an archbishop!<sup>1</sup>—none could resist this nameless charm; all, in turn, were at her feet.

In the early years of her career at the Opera, the reports of the inspectors of the Lieutenants of Police provide us with abundant information in regard to the amorous adventures of the *danseuse*. To M. Bertin, who, poor man! probably bored Mlle. Guimard as much as he had Sophie Arnould, succeeded M. de Boutourlin, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of Spain, who, during a visit to Paris, lived with her for some time, but, finally, had the bad taste to leave her for Mlle. Lafond of the Comédie-Italienne. Mlle. Guimard, however, speedily turned the tables upon the "Italians," by detaching the Comte de Rochefort from Mlle. Collette of that theatre, a triumph which enriched her jewel-case by "a diamond collar of great price," and other acquisitions. In the meanwhile—for the lady, like Mlle. Clairon, was quite capable of carrying on two or three love-affairs at once—a connection of a more durable nature had been formed

<sup>1</sup> The Archbishop of Sens,

between the *danseuse* and the farmer-general Jean Benjamin de la Borde, first *valet-de-chambre* to Louis XV.

Jean Benjamin de la Borde, celebrated by those two verses of his friend Voltaire,

"Avec tous les talens le destin l'a fait naître  
Il fait tous les plaisirs de la société,"

was an ideal lover. He was at this time about thirty years of age, an accomplished courtier, a musician of some little talent, and possessed of considerable literary gifts,<sup>1</sup> and "a frank, loyal, modest, generous, and kind-hearted man."

From this *liaison*, in April 1763, was born a daughter, baptized as the child of a father and mother unknown, but formally acknowledged by her parents seven years later. In May 1778, at the age of fifteen, this daughter, who bore her mother's baptismal name of Marie Madeleine, married one Claude Drais, a goldsmith and jeweller of the Quai des Orfèvres. The girl did not go to her husband empty-handed, for the marriage contract, which is given by M. Campardon, in his *L'Académie royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, makes provision for

<sup>1</sup> He was the author of *Pensées et Maximes*, published some years after his death, a work in the style of La Rochefoucauld, which reveals him as a keen observer of life and particularly of woman. Here are some of his reflections :

"Vouloir qu'on soit amoureux avec raison, c'est vouloir qu'on soit fou avec raison."

"Une femme qui sait mal est moins supportable qu'une femme qui ne sait rien."

"Le plaisir est comme une fleur, dont l'odeur est délicate, et qu'il faut sentir légèrement, si on veut toujours lui trouver le même parfum."

"La plupart des femmes ressemblent à des énigmes qui cessent de plaire, dès qu'elles sont devinées."

"Qui aime est bien plus heureux que d'être aimé."

"On combat l'amour par la fuite et la colère par le silence."



a dowry of 125,000 livres; "100,000 livres in cash, which the demoiselle Guimard engages to pay in *écus* of six livres, within the space of two years," and 25,000 livres, composed of a trousseau, furniture, diamonds, jewellery, clothes, linen, and lace. The marriage was a sad one, as the young bride died a year later, to the great distress of her mother, who was so prostrated by grief that it was some months before she was able to appear again upon the stage.

One might have supposed that the possession of a lover like M. de la Borde, who, in addition to his many amiable qualities, was a wealthy man, would have satisfied Mlle. Guimard. Such, however, was not the case, as, in 1768, we find her the mistress—or rather one of the mistresses—of the Maréchal Prince de Soubise, whom the favour of Madame de Pompadour promoted to the command of the French troops so disastrously defeated in the Battle of Rossbach.

The seraglio of the Prince de Soubise rivalled that of the Prince de Conti; but, whereas the latter's included ladies of every station in life, that of the former seems to have been mainly recruited from the Opera, and the pensions paid by him to *danseuses* who had ceased to find favour in his eyes must alone have represented a considerable fortune.

The prince was generosity itself. He made Mlle. Guimard a monthly allowance of 2000 *écus*, surrounded her with every luxury that the heart of woman could desire, and loaded her with costly gifts. The faithful La Borde, who, though no longer the lady's official protector, was graciously permitted to remain her *amant de cœur*, continued to contribute in a rather more modest manner to the expenses of his beloved, and the toilettes,

and equipages, and diamonds, of Mlle. Guimard surpassed even those of Mlle. Deschamps, whose magnificence had up to that time never been approached.

At the fashionable drive to Longchamps, on the Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of Holy Week 1768, a function always much patronised by the "*haute impure*" of the capital, the equipage of Mlle. Guimard was the centre of attraction. "The Princes and Grandees of the realm," say the omniscient Bachaumont, "were present in the most imposing and magnificent equipages, and the courtesans were conspicuous, as they usually are. But Mlle. Guimard, '*la belle damnée*,' as M. Marmontel calls her, drew upon her the attention of all by a chariot of exquisite elegance, very worthy to contain the Graces and the modern Terpsichore. What has particularly engaged the attention of the public are the significant Arms that this celebrated courtesan has adopted. In the midst of the shield one sees a mark of gold, from which springs a mistletoe. The Graces serve as supporters, and Cupids crown the design. The whole emblem is most ingenious."<sup>1</sup>

Every week Mlle. Guimard gave three supper-parties. To the first came the most distinguished noblemen of the Court and other persons of consideration ; the second was a *réunion* of authors, artists, and savants, a company not unworthy of comparison with that which assembled in the salon of Madame Geoffrin ; while the third, says Bachaumont, "was a veritable orgy, to which were invited the most abandoned courtesans, and where luxury and debauchery were carried to their furthest limits."

But what were these suppers compared with the entertainments which the *danseuse* gave at her superb

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, iii. 383.

country-house at Pantin, in which she had constructed a charming miniature theatre, built in the form of two demi-ellipses ? The *salle* was 157 ft. 9 in. in length, and 21 ft. 8 in. in breadth, while the distance from the bottom of the orchestra to the ceiling was 22 ft. It had seating accommodation for two hundred and thirty-four spectators, exclusive of the accommodation provided by the boxes, of which there were six. Several of these boxes were protected by grills, in order that exalted personages might enjoy the performances without being recognised.

Here, in 1768, was performed Collé's *Partie de Chasse de Henri IV.*, before a distinguished company, for all aristocratic Paris disputed for invitations to Mlle. Guimard's entertainments, and people spoke of "going to Pantin" as they spoke of going to Versailles.

The success of this comedy was so great that two other performances were to have been given at the following Christmas ; but the public had begun to murmur at the frequent absences of the best actors and actresses of the capital, and the representations were forbidden by an order from the Gentlemen of the Chamber, which prohibited the members of the Comédie-Française and the Comédie-Italienne from performing anywhere, save in their own theatres.

All the pieces performed at Pantin were not nearly so unobjectionable in character as Collé's charming comedy ; indeed the dialogue, songs, and dances of the majority of them were exceedingly free, and in some cases disgracefully licentious<sup>1</sup> ; while the farewell address

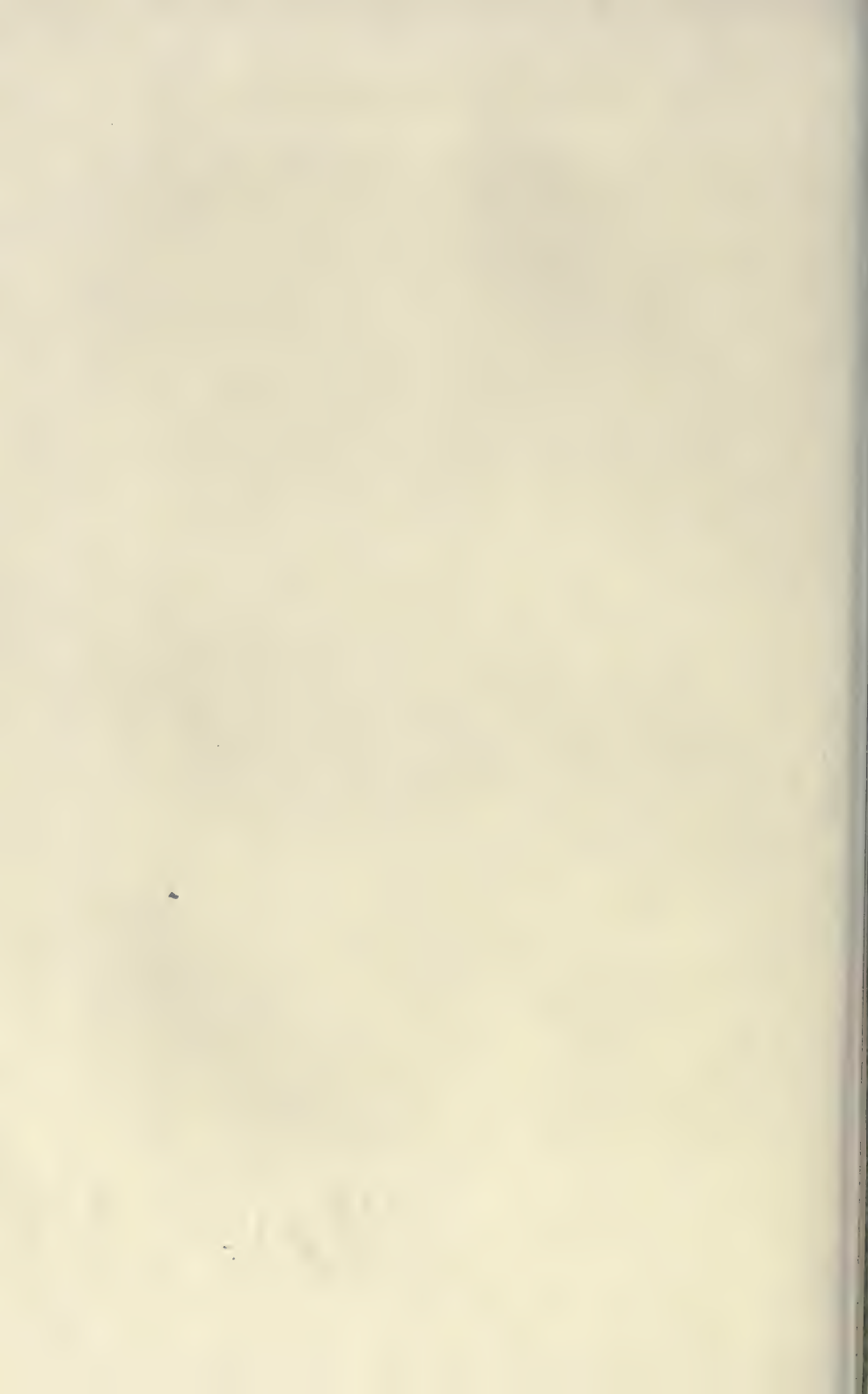
<sup>1</sup> The titles of some of the pieces represented speak for themselves : *Junon et Ganymède, comédie érotique* ; *La Vierge de Babylone, comédie érotique* ; *César et les deux Vestales, pièce érotique en un acte* ; *Héloïse et Abailard, comédie érotique en un acte* ; *Ninon et Lachatre, scène érotique* ; *Minette et Finette, ou les Épreuves d'amour*, and so forth.





MARIE MADELEINE GUIMARD

From an engraving by GERVAIS after the painting by BOUCHER



pronounced from the stage, at the temporary closing of the theatre in September 1770, was one of the most outrageous pieces of *double entendre* ever uttered in public.<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Guimard's house at Pantin has long since disappeared; even its site is a matter for conjecture, and no contemporary description of it unfortunately exists. Some of its contents, however, have come, from time to time, into the market, from which we know that it must have been one of the most charmingly-appointed houses of the time, with its painted wainscots, its marble floors, its fluted pilasters, and its exquisitely decorated panels; a house worthy for a queen to inhabit instead of a *danseuse*.

The generosity of the Prince de Soubise and the devoted La Borde, lavish though it was, failed to suffice Mlle. Guimard, who, to meet her ever-increasing expenditure, found herself reluctantly compelled to associate with them a third lover.<sup>2</sup> This time she turned in the direction of the Church; M. de Jarente, Bishop of Orléans, was the happy man!

It was a prudent choice; M. de Jarente held the "*feuille des bénéfices*," which meant that he controlled the greater part of the ecclesiastical patronage of the

<sup>1</sup> It was composed by Armand, concierge of the Hôtel des Comédiens, and author of several dramas, at the instance of La Borde, who had recommended him to make it as salacious as possible.

<sup>2</sup> Mlle. Guimard had, in point of fact, a third lover already, in the person of the dancer Dauberval; but he was a negligible quantity, so far as contributions to the lady's revenues were concerned. A satirical print of the time entitled *Concert à trois*, shows us the ballerina holding a roll of music in her hand and about to sing, her chief protector, the Prince de Soubise, playing the violin, the *sous-entreteneur*, La Borde, beating time with the conductor's bâton, and Dauberval playing the cornet.



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realm. How he had discharged that important trust previous to his *liaison* with the notorious ballerina we are unable to say. How he discharged it after he had succumbed to her charms is but too well known : the *feuille des bénéfices* became "the fief of the Opera"; the ante-chamber of Mlle. Guimard was crowded with ecclesiastics soliciting the honour of an audience, and abbeys, priories, and chapels were knocked down to the highest bidder. And the *danseuse*, reclining gracefully on her *chaise longue*, was heard to inquire ironically of a friend about to present to her a young abbé who had come to ask for a benefice : "Is this man of good moral character ?"

But, with all her faults and follies, Madeleine Guimard was not without redeeming qualities. Of her, as of Madame du Barry, it might be said that, if her wealth was ill-gotten, it was not always ill-spent. No more charitable woman breathed ; her purse was always open to the necessitous, and she was never happier than when relieving the wants of others. Grimm relates that during the terrible January of 1768, when whole families of the poorer inhabitants of Paris were perishing from cold and hunger, Mlle. Guimard begged the Prince de Soubise to give her her New Year's gift in money, instead of the jewellery which was his customary offering to his enchantresses. Then, one evening, she left her house, alone and simply dressed, taking with her the 6000 livres which that good-natured libertine had sent her,<sup>1</sup> and distributed the money, together with a considerable sum from her

<sup>1</sup> The *Mémoires secrets* attribute another source to the 6000 livres : "This actress, very celebrated by her talents, having had a rendezvous in an isolated faubourg with a man whose robe exacted the most profound

own pocket, among her indigent neighbours, visiting the most squalid and miserable dwellings, in order to discover the cases most deserving of assistance. This generous act, it appears, was accomplished with the most profound secrecy, and until the inquiries of the police had penetrated the mystery, not even the objects of her bounty had the slightest clue to the identity of their benefactress.

Mlle. Guimard's benevolence is commemorated by a rare engraving of the time, without the name of the draughtsman or the engraver, bearing the title :

*Terpsichore Charitable*  
*ou*  
*Mademoiselle Guimard*  
*visitant les Pauvres.*

In this engraving one sees an old woman lying on a pallet in a barn, and, advancing towards her, a lady wearing a hood, followed by a troupe of Cupids, bearing bread, soup, and wine.

The ballerina's liberality was far from being confined to the poor. Her purse was open to all, no matter how little claim they might have upon her. Struggling tradesmen in the grasp of usurers, clerks out of employment, and even gamblers unable to discharge their obligations came to knock at the door of her hôtel, and few went empty away. Once, an officer came to ask for the loan of a hundred louis, wherewith to pay a debt of honour, and offered to sign a document in acknowledgment.

mystery, had occasion to witness the misery, grief, and despair of the people of this neighbourhood, on account of the excessive cold. Her heart was moved with compassion at such a sight, and of the 2000 écus, the fruit of her iniquity, she herself distributed a part and carried the balance to the curé of Saint-Roch, for the same purpose."

"Monsieur," replied Mlle. Guimard, "your word is quite enough for me. I imagine that an officer will have at least as much honour as an Opera-girl."

Her house at Pantin did not long content Mlle. Guimard; and she, accordingly, conceived the idea of building herself an hôtel in Paris; not an ordinary hôtel, be it understood, but a veritable palace, a palace such as no divinity of the stage had ever before inhabited, save in her dreams. The will of the *danseuse* was law to her adorers; the prince, the bishop, and the farmer-general hastened to disgorge the necessary funds, and the "Temple of Terpsichore," as it was called by the Parisians, began to rise. The site chosen was in the Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, not far from the spot where stood the hôtel of a rival courtesan, Mlle. Dervieux. Le Doux, the architect of Madame du Barry's pavilion at Louveciennes, drew up the plans.

A charming coloured sketch, in imitation of a water-colour of the time, has preserved to us the appearance of the hôtel of Mlle. Guimard. The porch is adorned by four columns, above which is an isolated group, in Conflans stone, 6 ft. in proportion, representing Terpsichore being crowned by Apollo. This was the work of the sculptor Le Comte, who is also responsible for a beautiful bas-relief, 22 ft. in length, and 4 ft. in height, where he has executed the triumph of the Muse of dancing, who is shown seated in a chariot, drawn by Cupids, preceded by Bacchantes and Fauns, and followed by the Graces of choregraphy.

Two little windows enable us to obtain a glimpse of the interior. One shows us the ante-chamber and the *salle-à-manger*, the latter of which is decorated with vases of gushing water, borne by groups of Naiads. The



other introduces us into the theatre, an imitation in miniature of the *salle* at Versailles, with a ceiling painted by Taravel, and accommodation for five hundred spectators.<sup>1</sup>

This little palace, built and embellished under the supervision of the adoring La Borde, was a jewel of architecture, a marvel of decorative taste. "Picture to yourself," says a brochure of the time, "picture to yourself the happy and most brilliant assemblage of all the arts : they meet here to surpass themselves.

"The exterior is charming. The intention of the architect has been to represent the Temple of Terpsichore in the façade of the entrance side ; it would have been impossible to be more successful.

"In a little space, this delightful residence offers every conceivable advantage and charm, and what is not presented by truth is supplied by prestige. There is nothing, even to the garden, which does not charm and astonish by its wholly novel taste. The apartments seem to owe their different charms to magic ; riches without confusion, gallantry without indecorum ; they show us the interior of the Palace of Love, embellished by the Graces. The bedchamber invites repose ; the salon, pleasure ; the *salle-à-manger*, gaiety ; the forms are ingenious, without, however, there being any recourse to the extravagance of contrast, which is so often abused. A hothouse in the interior of the apartment takes the place in the winter of a garden ; it is furnished with a similar taste.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Walpole, writing to Sir Horace Mann, on September 9, 1771, says of the Hôtel Guimard : "The *salle-à-manger* is to have *des serres chaudes* (*sic*) round it, with windows opening into the room ; that it may have orange-flowers and odours all the winter."

The design is soft, without injury to the effect; the trellis is in accordance with the best architectural taste; the arabesques have nothing fantastic about them; the execution of all these different marvels appears to be the work of the same hand. Delicious harmony, which puts the *comble* upon the reputation of the architect, since it proves him to have recognised the importance of the choice of the artists who have seconded his efforts, and the importance of impressing them with his own ideas. We find here a little ballroom, whose style of decoration renders it enchanting and perhaps unique. One finds also a miniature theatre, which may be regarded as a *chef-d'œuvre* of its kind. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Two interesting anecdotes, both relating to famous painters of the eighteenth century, attach to the adornment of the "Temple of Terpsichore." Mlle. Guimard often came to visit her palace and supervise the decorations of the interior. One day, she remarked a young artist who was painting the arabesques on the walls, and, observing that he seemed sad and dispirited, questioned him and learned that he was studying under Vien, but that poverty compelled him to earn his bread by undertaking commissions of this kind, and prevented him from devoting himself to the studies necessary to enable him to compete with success for the Prix de Rome. The kind heart of the *danseuse* was touched by the young man's story; she immediately told him to abandon his work in the Chaussée-d'Antin and return to his studies, and sent him each month two hundred livres for his expenses. Thanks to her generosity, Vien's pupil was able to take full advantage of his master's lessons, and,

<sup>1</sup> Métra, *Correspondance secrète*, vol. viii. Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 90.

studying with unremitting ardour, carried off the coveted prize. This young artist was none other than Jacques Louis David, the painter of *Socrates*, *Brutus*, *The Sabines*, and *Leonidas*.

The other story relates to Fragonard. Fragonard had been chosen by Le Doux to paint the principal panel of the grand salon, a repetition in painting of the sculpture of the façade, that is to say, the representation of Mlle. Guimard as Terpsichore, and "surrounded by all the attributes which were able to characterise her in the most seducing manner." The work was still unfinished, when a quarrel arose between the lady and the painter, which ended in the latter being sent away and the completion of the task entrusted to another artist. One day, curious to see how his work had fared in the hands of his successor, Fragonard found means to introduce himself into the house, and made his way to the salon without encountering any one. Here, the sight of a palette and colours gave him the idea of a very piquant revenge. In four strokes of the brush, he effaced the smile from the lips of Terpsichore, and imparted to them instead an expression of anger and fury, taking care, however, to make no other alterations in the portrait. This done, he took his departure as stealthily as he had entered.

As ill-luck would have it, not long afterwards, Mlle. Guimard herself arrived on the scene, accompanied by a party of friends, who had come to pass judgment on the work of the new painter. Her indignation and disgust at finding herself thus disfigured may be readily imagined, but the more angry did she become, the more striking was the resemblance between herself and the portrait, a fact upon which, we may be very sure, the wittier members of the party did not fail to comment.



The little theatre, of which we have already spoken, was inaugurated on December 8, 1772, before even the house itself was completed. The pieces selected for the occasion were *La Partie de Chasse de Henri IV.*, and that exceedingly gay comedy, *La Vérité dans le vin*, both by Collé, Mlle. Guimard's favourite dramatist; and great was the competition in fashionable circles to obtain tickets of admission. It will be remembered that the performance of the former play by the members of the Comédie-Française, at Pantin, at Christmas 1768, had been forbidden by the Gentlemen of the Chamber; but now, thanks to the good offices of the Prince de Soubise, the prohibition, though repeated, was annulled by Louis XV. himself. A new difficulty, however, arose, through the opposition of Christophe de Beaumont, the austere Archbishop of Paris, who objected to the opening of the theatre, on account of the licentious character of *La Vérité dans le vin*, and, to pacify the metropolitan, it was found necessary to substitute for this comedy a pantomime entitled *Pygmalion*, a parody of Collé's little play of that name. On the great night, Mlle. Guimard must have been a proud woman indeed, since the most distinguished members of the *beau monde* and the *demi-monde* had congregated in the "Temple of Terpsichore," to do honour to its mistress: two Princes of the Blood, the Duc de Chartres and the Comte de Lamarche, and a select assortment of the most fascinating courtesans in Paris, "all radiant with diamonds."

In June 1773, the Prince de Soubise, ordinarily the most complacent of lovers, who had, up to that time, accepted with an almost marital indifference the division of Mlle. Guimard's favours between M. de la Borde and himself suddenly developed a violent attack of jealousy

and insisted on the lady giving the farmer-general his *congé*. Poor La Borde was in despair and straightway fell into a condition of the deepest melancholy, which even his beloved music was powerless to dissipate. At length, he determined to act on his own maxim: "*On combat l'amour par la fuite et la colère par le silence*,"<sup>1</sup> and departed on a course of foreign travel, visiting, amongst other places, Ferney, with a commission from Madame du Barry to kiss its owner on both cheeks.

Nothing seems to have delighted Mlle. Guimard more than scandalising the devout, and it must be admitted that the entertainments which she gave in her two theatres at Pantin and the Chaussée-d'Antin contributed very effectively to that end. In the early spring of 1776, she conceived the idea of organising "a picnic of scandalous immorality, a picnic such as French society had never yet beheld." There was to be a play, needless to say of a very free and easy kind, in which Mlle. Guimard herself was to take part, and the famous courtesan, Mlle. Duthé, to dance. Then Mlle. Dervieux was charged to order from a fashionable *traiteur* a sumptuous supper. And the play and the supper were to be followed by a ball, gambling for colossal stakes—it is to be presumed the ladies did not intend to risk their own money—and "everything which could accompany an orgy of this nature."

The fête, originally fixed for the Carnival, had been postponed to the first Thursday in Lent, in order, say the *Mémoires secrets*, to render it more singular and more celebrated.

All was arranged, the play staged, the supper prepared, when, on the complaint of Mlle. Guimard's enemy, the

<sup>1</sup> See note, p. 109, *supra*.

Archbishop of Paris, the King interfered and sent an order prohibiting play, ball, and supper. The Comte d'Artois and the Duc de Chartres, both of whom were to assist at the entertainment, did everything in their power to obtain a reversal of the order, but without success; and the commandant of the watch received instructions to post men in the streets leading from the *traiteur's* shop to the Chaussée-d'Antin, to intercept the supper on its way to Mlle. Guimard's hôtel.

Under these circumstances, the *danseuse* and her friends decided that the only thing to be done was to abandon the proposed entertainment, and send the supper to the curé of Saint-Roch, for distribution among the sick poor of his parish. And, as each of the subscribers to the prohibited picnic had contributed the sum of five louis, the wits named it, "*le repas des Chevaliers de Saint-Louis.*"

Nevertheless, in spite of the archbishop and the *dévots*, the theatre of the Chaussée-d'Antin continued to flourish and to number amongst its patrons Princes of the Blood, *grands seigneurs* of the Court, and courtesans of the highest distinction. The parody of *Ernelinde*, composed by the dancer Despréaux, performed there in September 1777, enjoyed an immense success, and was commanded to be represented before the Court at Choisy, the following month, when the young King, who had hitherto shown but little taste for the theatre, laughed so immoderately throughout the three acts, that he bestowed a pension on the dancer.

Mlle. Guimard's life of gallantry and extravagance did not cause her to neglect her profession. No more assiduous student of her art ever pirouetted across a stage,



and her career was a series of almost unbroken triumphs. In the ballet of *La Chercheuse d'esprit*, by Gardel the elder, played before the Court in 1777, and produced at the Opera the following year, her dancing and pantomime, in the part of Nicette, were generally allowed to have been inimitable.

"The difficulty of pantomime," writes Lefuel de Méricourt, in his journal *Le Nouveau Spectateur*, "is the power of expressing by means of gesture what seems to require the assistance of words. It was difficult, for example, in the person of the *Chercheuse d'esprit* to supply it in the verse,

'Allez chercher de l'esprit,'

which forms the *nœud* of the piece. But the acting of the Guimard leaves nothing to be desired at this interesting moment."

The critic of the *Mercure de France* is still more eulogistic: "One cannot praise too highly the talent of Mlle. Guimard, in the rôle of Nicette. It is necessary to see her to confess that never has one rendered a simpleton (*niaise*), at the same time simple and mischievous, more gracefully than this charming *actrice-danseuse*, who, in her art, is always what one would desire her to be."

And Grimm, in his *Correspondance littéraire*, after declaring that the talent of Mlle. Guimard has caused one to overlook the faults of the ballet, praises the *danseuse* in these terms: "She has imparted to the rôle of Nicette, a gradation of shades, so fine, so correct, so delicate, so piquant, that the most ingenious poetry would be powerless to render the same characters with more wit, delicacy, or truth. All her steps, all her movements, are soft and harmonious, and exhibit a meaning both sure and

picturesque. How naïve is her simplicity, and yet how devoid of silliness! How well does her natural grace conceal itself without affectation! How gradually does her character expand, and how much she pleases, without exerting herself to please! How she comes to life in the sweet rays of sentiment! It is a rosebud which one sees expand, to escape slowly from the fetters which envelop it, to tremble into bloom. We have never seen, in this kind of imitation, anything more delicious or more perfect."

Some months later, in *Ninette à la Cour*, she played the part of Ninette "in a way which stupefied the spectators." "One was really confounded to see this artiste, admired hitherto for the grace of her acting, transform herself of a sudden into a maladroit, awkward creature, overcome with astonishment at the novel sights which meet her eyes, and depicting in a striking manner the impressions of a peasant leaving her village for the first time. The following circumstance is able to convey some idea of the difficulties which Mlle. Guimard had overcome in this rôle. It was remarked that at the time of the minuet that Nicette dances before the King and his Court, she made great efforts to dance out of time, and that generally, in spite of herself, the sensibility of her ear forced her to dance correctly."<sup>1</sup>

Other scarcely less brilliant triumphs awaited Mlle. Guimard in the ballets of *Les Caprices de Galathée*, composed expressly for her by Noverre, *Médée et Jason*, *Myrza*, *La Rosière*, and *Le Premier Navigateur, ou le Pouvoir de l'amour*. Her success in the last-named piece, produced on July 26, 1785, four years before her

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *L'Académie royale de Musique au XVIII. siècle*: Article "Guimard."

retirement from the stage, was celebrated by the poet Dorat in the following pretty verses :

“ Quelle nymphe légère, à mes yeux se présente !  
 Déesse, elle folâtre et n'est point imposante,  
 Son front s'épanouit avec sérénité,  
 Ses cheveux sont flottants, le rire est sa beauté.  
 D'un feston de jasmin, sa tête est couronnée,  
 Et sa robe voltige, aux vents abandonnée.  
 Mille songes légers l'environnent toujours ;  
 Plus que le printemps même, elle fait les beaux jours.  
 Des matelots joyeux, rassemblés auprès d'elle  
 Détonnent à sa gloire une ronde nouvelle,  
 Et de jeunes pasteurs, désertant les hameaux,  
 Viennent la saluer aux sons des chalumeaux.  
 C'est l'aimable gaîté ; qui peut la méconnaître,  
 Au chagrin qui s'envole, aux jeux qu'elle fait naître ?  
 Fille de l'innocence, image du bonheur,  
 Le charme quite suit, a passé dans mon cœur.  
 Sur ce gazon fleuri qu'elle a choisi pour trône,  
 Pasteurs, exécutons les danses qu'elle ordonne.  
 . . . . .  
 Fuyez, arrêtez-vous, suspendez votre ivresse ;  
 Comme Guimard enfin appelez les désirs,  
 Et que vos pas brillants soient le vol des plaisirs.”<sup>1</sup>

It is hardly necessary to remark that such an artiste was appreciated as she deserved by the administration of the Opera, to whom she rendered so many services. Unfortunately, she not seldom abused the position which her talent and her intimate relations with the most distinguished personages of the time gave her, and occasioned the unfortunate directors almost as much trouble and anxiety, in her way, as did Sophie Arnould. Thus, in the spring of 1772, she, with her lover, the dancer Dauberval, organised a mutiny against Rebel, who had

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 226.



just been appointed "Directeur-général de l'Académie royale de Musique"—a mutiny which was only quelled by the personal interference of the Minister of the King's Household, who summoned the malcontents before him and threatened them with severe pains and penalties if they continued contumacious. Six years later, we find her at the head of the opposition to Devismes, who, appointed director of the Opera at Easter 1778, had introduced various innovations, which, though popular with the patrons of the theatre, were strongly resented by the artistes. The principal "insurgents" held what they called a "Congress" at Mlle. Guimard's hôtel, and Auguste Vestris, with characteristic modesty, compared his position with that of Washington. The revolt ended in the town of Paris cancelling Devismes's appointment and taking upon itself the management of the theatre, Devismes receiving a large sum by way of compensation.<sup>1</sup>

A memoir sent by Antoine Dauvergne, the then director of the Opera, in 1781, to La Ferté, Intendant des Menus, shows us Mlle. Guimard supreme in the *coulisses* of the theatre. All the affairs of the Opera, he says, are treated of in private committees held at Mlle. Guimard's hôtel, and the orders of the administration are ignored whenever they happen to clash with the wishes of the lady, to whom every one—dancers, vocalists, composers, scene-painters, and so forth—is subservient.

<sup>1</sup> Previous to this arrangement being arrived at, the Chevalier de Saint-George, the Creole, famous as a fencer and musician, offered, with the assistance of a society of capitalists, to undertake the direction of the Opera. But Mlle. Guimard, Sophie Arnould, and certain other nymphs, jealous of the honour of their profession, addressed a petition to the Queen, representing that their honour would not allow them to submit to the direction of a mulatto.

A little later, Dauvergne complains that the demoiselle Guimard refuses to have an understudy in the *ballets d'action*, in consequence of which, whenever she is unable to appear, there can be no ballet; also that she has quarrelled with Noverre and proscribed his ballets. "Not only does she refuse to dance in them herself, but she is unwilling for other persons to dance in them."<sup>1</sup>

There exists a curious document, dated 1783, drawn up by La Ferté, for the information of the Minister of the King's Household, on the talents, faults, habits, characters, and so forth of the singers and dancers of the Opera. And here is what the Intendant des Menus says of Mlle. Guimard:

"D<sup>lle</sup>. Guimard.—*Première danseuse de demi-caractère*. Her talent is known to every one; on the stage she still retains a very youthful appearance; if she has not a great deal of execution in her dancing, she possesses, by way of compensation, much grace; she is very good in *ballets d'action* and in pantomime; she has much zeal and works hard; but she is an enormous expense to the Opera, where her wishes are followed with as much respect as if she was its director. Following her example, the other actresses demand the most costly dresses and equipments."

But enormous expense or not, the directors of the Opera seemed to have been possessed by an ever-present dread lest Mlle. Guimard should take it into her head to retire or transfer her services to some foreign stage. After the destruction of the Opera by fire in June 1781, and while the new Opera of the Porte Saint-Martin was in course of erection, the minds of many of the

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *L'Académie royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*: Article, "Dauvergne."

homeless singers and dancers "turned towards the shores of Great Britain and the guineas of Drury Lane," and, in spite of the most stringent precautions on the part of the Government, several of them succeeded in emigrating.<sup>1</sup> Although Mlle. Guimard's fortune placed her in a position, where, according to the expression of La Ferté, "she had very little need to trouble herself about England," the anxious Intendant was only half-reassured and wrote to the Minister of the King's Household, begging him to use every inducement possible to keep the lady in France.

Mlle. Guimard remained faithful and reaped the reward of her fidelity in the spring of the following year, when she demanded and obtained a pension of 2500 livres, which, with an annual *gratification* of 1500 livres and her salary of 2000 livres, brought her professional income up to 6000 livres.

In the fire at the Opera-house, referred to above, Mlle. Guimard had a very narrow escape of her life. The fire broke out at the end of the third act of *Orphée*, happily after the majority of the audience had quitted their seats. Mlle. Guimard was in her *loge* at the time, and, not daring to leave it, would probably have been stifled, had not a scene-shifter come to her assistance and, wrapping her in the curtains—for she was half-undressed—carried her through the smoke and flames to a place of safety.

This was not the only time the *danseuse* was in danger

<sup>1</sup> The dancer Nivelon, who escaped across the Belgian frontier, with the intention of making his way to England, was hotly pursued by a police-agent named Quidor, with orders to arrest him and bring him back to Paris. While, however, Quidor was endeavouring to obtain an extradition warrant from the authorities at Brussels, the dancer contrived to reach Ostende and escaped across the Channel.



during the course of her professional career. In June 1784, while appearing at the Opera-house in the Haymarket, in London, then under Gallini's management, the theatre was completely destroyed by fire. Boaden, in his *Life of John Kemble*, thus alludes to the catastrophe :

“On the 17th of June 1784, I was, on my return from a visit, crossing the Park from Buckingham Gate to Stable Yard, St. James's, when this most tremendous conflagration burst upon me ; it seemed to make the long line of trees wave in an atmosphere of fire. . . . The fire had commenced in the flies and burst through the roof in a column of confirmed fierceness, that evinced its strength to have been irresistible, even when it was first perceived. In the theatre, about two o'clock, they had been rehearsing a ballet, and the first alarm was occasioned by the sparks of fire which fell upon the heads of the dancers. Mme. Ravelli was with difficulty saved by one of the firemen ; Mme. Guimard lost a slipper, but escaped in safety.”

A few years after her first appearance at the Opera, an accident occurred which might have been attended with serious consequences to Mlle. Guimard. One night in January 1766, during a performance of *Les Fêtes de l'Hymen et de l'Amour*, a heavy piece of scenery fell upon her, throwing her to the ground and breaking her arm. Had it struck her upon the head, she would certainly have been killed.

At the end of the year 1782, came the bankruptcy of the Prince de Guéménée, whose wife, *gouvernante* to the children of Louis XVI., was the daughter of the Prince de Soubise : a catastrophe which involved more than three thousand people, many of whom were completely ruined. Mlle. Guimard's tender relations with the Prince de Soubise had come to an end some years

earlier—she had been succeeded in his affections and the enjoyment of the two thousand écus a month, by her niece and pupil, Mlle. Zacharie, a damsel of fifteen summers—but she still remained on excellent terms with her former lover and received a handsome pension, as the reward of her not very faithful services. This pension she now determined to renounce, in favour of the creditors of the Prince de Guéménée, and having persuaded several other ladies of the ballet, who, like herself, had once basked in the smiles of the “Sultan of the Opera” and had been similarly provided for, to follow her example, they met one day in her dressing-room and drew up a letter to the prince setting forth their wishes, copies of which they caused to be distributed among the habitués of the theatre.

*Letter of Mlle. GUIMARD and other danseuses of the Opera to M. LE PRINCE DE SOUBISE.*

“MONSEIGNEUR,—Accustomed, my comrades and myself, to have you in our midst at each performance of the Théâtre-Lyrique, we have observed with the most bitter regret, that not only were you weaned from the pleasures of the play, but that none of us have been summoned to those frequent *petits soupers*, at which we had, in turn, the happiness of pleasing and amusing you. Rumour has only too well informed us of the cause of your retirement and of your just grief. Up to the present, we have feared to trouble you, making our sensibility yield to our respect; we should not even dare to break silence, without the pressing motive which our delicacy is not able to resist. We flattered ourselves, Monseigneur, that the bankruptcy (for one must needs employ a term with which the *foyers*, the clubs, the

gazettes, France, and the whole of Europe resound), that the bankruptcy of M. le Prince de Guéménée would not be on so enormous a scale as was announced. But the derangement of his affairs has reached such a point that no hope remains. We have come to this conclusion from the generous sacrifices to which, following your example, the principal chiefs of your illustrious house have resigned themselves.

“We should believe ourselves guilty of ingratitude, were we not to imitate you, in seconding your humanity; were we not to return the pensions which your munificence has lavished upon us. Apply these revenues, Monseigneur, to the relief of the many suffering military men, the many poor men of letters, the many unhappy servants, whom M. le Prince de Guéménée drags into the abyss with him. As for ourselves, we have other resources; we shall lose nothing, Monseigneur, if we retain your esteem for us. We shall even be the gainers if, in refusing your benefits, we compel our detractors to confess that we were not altogether unworthy of them.

“We are with profound respect, &c.

*“In the dressing-room of Mlle. Guimard,  
this Friday, December 6, 1782.”*

In August 1783, Mlle. Guimard was attacked by small-pox, to the great alarm of the patrons of the Opera, who feared that, even if she were to recover, the priests might succeed in persuading her to renounce her profession. Happily, however, the attack was a mild one, and on August 29 a fête was held at the *danseuse's* hôtel, “to render thanks to her lovers for the care they had taken of her.”

In the following year, however, Mlle. Guimard did



announce her intention of retiring, whereupon La Ferté wrote in hot haste to the Minister of the King's Household, begging him to promise her an addition of one thousand livres to her retiring pension, if she would reconsider her decision. As the ballerina had already demanded this favour, it is probable that the announcement of her approaching resignation was merely a ruse on her part to force the Minister's hand.

The Minister replied the same day to La Ferté, that, "although a favour accorded to one person opens the door to a whole crowd of pretensions," in consideration of her long services, he promised to assure to her, when she should retire, the additional thousand livres which she demanded ; but on condition that she should preserve the most profound secrecy in regard to this favour.

In the early part of the year 1785, Mlle. Guimard fell into financial difficulties and was obliged to sell the "Temple of Terpsichore," in the Chaussée-d'Antin. Instead of putting it up to auction or inviting private offers, she decided to adopt the somewhat novel expedient of disposing of it by lottery, and, having succeeded in obtaining the permission of the authorities, or at any rate a promise that they would not offer any opposition to the scheme, caused the following prospectus to be circulated :

*"Prospectus of a lottery of the house of Mlle. Guimard, of which the draw will take place in public, May 1, 1786, in a room of the Hôtel des Menus, Rue Bergère, in the presence of a public official."*

"This house is situated at the entrance of the Chaussée-d'Antin, and consists of a building, with a court on one side and a garden on the other. The side facing the court is adorned by a peristyle ; the *rez-de-chaussée*,

which is raised on eight steps, is divided into an ante-chamber, dining-room, bedchamber, boudoir, a large room lighted from above, to serve as a picture-gallery, dressing-room, bathroom, &c., all richly decorated.

"Above are also private apartments very commodious, and likewise very richly decorated.

"A building facing the street contains stables and coach-houses, and above is a theatre with all its accessories.

"The garden is adorned with covered bowers. The greater part of the furniture remains in the house, having been made for the place.

"The lottery will consist of 2500 tickets, at 120 livres a ticket, of which one will be the winner.

"Immediately after the lottery has been drawn, Mlle. Guimard will transfer the contract of the sale of the house and the furniture, to the benefit of the owner of the winning lot."

The drawing of the lottery, originally fixed for May 1, 1786, was, for some reason, postponed until the 22nd of the month, when it took place in a tent erected in the garden of the Hôtel des Menus. There were two wheels, in one of which had been placed 2500 numbered tickets, and in the other 2499 blank tickets and one bearing the word *Lot*. The draw began at ten o'clock in the morning; but it was not until late in the afternoon, and after 2267 tickets had been drawn, that the winning one was forthcoming, when it was found that Mlle. Guimard's hôtel had become the property of the Comtesse de Lau, who had only purchased a single ticket. That lady subsequently sold the hôtel to the banker Perregaux, for 500,000 livres.

Mlle. Guimard was growing old; the fatal epoch

when beauty is usually compelled to renounce its rights had come ; but, like the wicked old Maréchal de Richelieu, she seemed to have drunk of the fountain of eternal youth, and on the boards of the Opera, environed by her cloud of gauze, she appeared as young and fresh and charming as ever. What was her secret ? According to the actor Fleury it was an ingenious one. At twenty years of age, he tells us, she had had her portrait painted by a faithful hand, and now, each morning in her boudoir, with this picture on one side and her mirror on the other, she worked to assimilate the face she saw reflected in the latter to the work of the painter, nor did she desist from her labours until she felt certain of a perfect resemblance. Her admirers, it is scarcely necessary to observe, were not admitted to this function.<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Guimard visited London on several occasions during the season to dance at the Opera House in the Haymarket or at Covent Garden. Three letters, two written respectively on June 20, 1784, and April 16, 1789, to the banker Perregaux, the third bearing date May 26 (probably 1787), contain some interesting details about her sojourn in England. From the first, we learn that she was engaged at a salary of 650 guineas, half of which seems to have been paid in advance and the balance on the termination of her engagement. The latter instalment she complains that she had just seen devoured by a fire which had reduced the theatre to ashes. She graciously says that she has no complaint to make of the inhabitants of London ; but the Italians of the Opera—“*Ah, les coquins !*” They are everything that is bad. And the rest of the letter is chiefly taken up with an account of her dispute with Gallini as to whether or not

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Fleury*, ii. 119.



her articles had been dissolved by the destruction of the theatre.

The second letter, in order of date, is more interesting. "Since my arrival in this town," she writes, "the people have not left me a single moment to myself. I am overwhelmed by the kindness of all the great ladies and principally of the Duchess of Devonshire. I pass all my time with her, when I am not engaged at the theatre. In truth, my dear little good friend, the manner in which I am everywhere received is so flattering that a less sensible head than that of your little good friend might be turned by it." She goes on to say that she has just been given a benefit performance, which has realised 950 guineas, and has concluded an engagement for the last five weeks of her stay in England. For this she is to receive 650 guineas, "which makes a very pretty sum for me to bring back to Paris." "This journey has not been so unprofitable, *hein!* What think you about it? They love me to distraction, these good English! *Voilà ce que c'est que le merite!*"

The third letter shows us that in London the ballerina was regarded as the very glass of fashion: "For the ball [a ball at Drury Lane organised by the Duchess of Devonshire and other ladies] one must have dresses, and the English ladies are as coquettish as the French. The moment I alighted from my carriage on my arrival, I was besieged by *marchandes des modes* and tailors, who had come to beg me, on the part of the ladies, to give my opinion on their costumes. You know well that I did not make the fashions."

Of Mlle. Guimard's visits to England there exists a weird souvenir in the form of a coloured etching entitled:

"The Celebrated Mademoiselle G——rd, or Grimhard, from Paris. *Published by Thomas Humphrey, May 26, 1787.*"

The leanness of the ballerina, of which we have spoken elsewhere, seems to have increased with years, and was the theme of jests innumerable at her expense and that of her lovers, most of them, however, good-natured enough, for Madeleine Guimard had few enemies, and even the chroniclers of contemporary scandal generally have a good word to say for her.

In the etching in question one sees, under a toque with sky-blue plumes, a woman, with a death's head crowned with false hair, and a bony neck, raising in the air a consumptive leg and waving her arms, at the ends of which are phalanxes of little bones in place of fingers.<sup>1</sup>

On her return to Paris, from England, in the summer of 1789, Mlle. Guimard married Jean Étienne Despréaux, the dancing-master and poet, who had been for some years an intimate friend, though not, it would appear, a lover.<sup>2</sup> The marriage took place on August 14, at the

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> He was the son of a musician of the Opera, and was born on August 31, 1746. He became a dancer at the theatre in 1764, where he quickly distinguished himself by his skill in "*la danse haute*," his performances in the ballets introduced into *Les Amours de Ragonde* (1773), *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), *Philémon et Baucis* (1774), and *La Cercheuse d'esprit* (1778), being particularly admired. In 1781, owing to an injury to one of his feet, he retired from the active exercise of his profession, and was appointed *maître des ballets*. In the following year, he received from the King a pension of 1500 livres, for his services as a dancer in ballets represented before the Court. A facile and graceful poet, Despréaux was the author of several parodies of operas: *Christophe et Pierre Luc*, parody of *Castor et Pollux*; *Momi*, parody of *Iphigénie*; *Syncope, reine de Mic-Mac*, parody of *Pénélope*, and *Berlingue*, parody of *Ernelinde*, which so pleased Louis XVI. when played before the Court, at Choisy, in 1777, that he granted the author a pension.—Campardon, *Académie royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, i. 146.

church of Sainte-Marie du Temple, the age of the bride being forty-six and that of her husband thirty-one. The *acte de mariage*, cited by Jal, states that the two had received the nuptial benediction, "after having renounced their profession," and, to the great sorrow of her countless admirers, the Opera knew Madeleine Guimard no more.

It is not altogether easy to determine the reasons which induced Mlle. Guimard to take this step; a step which, as we have mentioned, entailed the renunciation of her profession. Certainly it could not have been any interested motive, since Despréaux was in far from affluent circumstances, while the *danseuse* was in possession of a comfortable little fortune, as fortunes went, in theatrical circles, in those days.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it at all likely that she was consumed with any very violent passion for the dancing-master, who, on his own confession, was insignificant of figure and remarkably plain of face.<sup>2</sup> The probability is that she was by this time heartily

<sup>1</sup> The marriage contract states that the property of the bride consisted of (1) an annuity of 12,000 livres; (2) a pension of 2600 livres on the King's Privy Purse; (3) a pension of 6000 livres on the Royal Treasury; (4) a pension of 3000 livres on the treasury of the Opera; (5) a sum of 110,000 livres, partly in cash and partly in furniture, jewellery, linen, and wearing apparel.

<sup>2</sup> In a manuscript collection of his *chansons* preserved in the *Bibliothèque de l'Opéra*, he describes himself in the following terms:

" Il faut que je vous désigne  
De ma taille la grandeur :  
Cinq pieds, trois pouces, neuf lignes,  
Voilà juste ma hauteur.  
Large front, bouche moyenne,  
Menton pointu, le nez long,  
Les yeux gris, figure pleine,  
Sourcils bruns, cheveux blonds."



tired of the stage and of a life of gallantry, and desired to spend the remainder of her days in retirement and the odour of sanctity, with a man who, if he had no physical attractions to boast of, "possessed all the little agreeable talents calculated to assure the affection of a woman of pleasure whose youth was dead."<sup>1</sup>

However that may be, the *ménage* appears to have been a happy one, and that notwithstanding the fact that the *danseuse* and her husband were very far from enjoying the life of comfort and tranquillity to which they had looked forward. For the Revolution had begun; and the Revolution meant to themselves and hundreds of other pensioners of the State an abrupt descent from comparative affluence to poverty. Their circumstances were, of course, superior to most of their colleagues, as Madeleine Guimard had saved money, a very small proportion, it is true, of the enormous sums which had passed through her hands, but still sufficient to save them from actual want.

When, in 1792, the municipality entrusted the management of the Opera to Celerier and Francœur, Despréaux was nominated by them a member of the administrative council and stage-manager. These posts would have more than compensated him for the loss of his pensions, but, unfortunately, the directors were shortly afterwards accused of embezzlement and arrested; and in September 1793, Despréaux, perhaps fearful of sharing their fate, resigned.

He and his wife now retired to a little house on the summit of Montmartre, to reach which, he tells us, it was necessary to traverse a road so steep that the Jacobin patrols neglected to ascend it, and they were, in conse-

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 276.

quence, left undisturbed. Here they appeared to have lived for some three years, and it was here that Despréaux composed most of the poems which he published later, under the title of *Mes Passe-Temps*. "I composed these *chansons*," he says, "to find some distraction from the terrible evils that beset us, and as a little surprise for my wife, whom I adored."<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the disparity in years between them, there can be no doubt that Despréaux was devoted to his wife, and in a poetical "*bouquet*," entitled *Un Bon Ménage*, published in 1806, he informs the world of the profound happiness which he has found in his union with the *danseuse* :

"Ah ! mon Dieu ! combien j'étais fou !

Je redoutais le mariage ;

Et j'avais lu, je ne sais où :

'Le bonheur n'est pas en ménage.'

Erreur ! ta bonté, ta raison

M'ont enfin prouvé le contraire,

Et je vois, dans l'heureux garçon

L'heureux imaginaire (*bis*).

Magdelaine aime ma gaîté

Et moi sa tournure m'enchanté,

Elle fait ma félicité

Elle est en vérité, charmante !

Elle prouve depuis vingt ans

Par sa grâce qui m'est si chère,

Qu'on a l'art d'arrêter le temps,

Quand on a l'art de plaire (*bis*)."

In 1807, Despréaux was appointed inspector of the theatres of the Opera and the Tuileries. Having religiously preserved the traditions of the ancient Court,

<sup>1</sup> A. F. Didot, *Souvenirs de Jean Étienne Despréaux*, p. 34.

he was often consulted in regard to the ceremonial to be observed at the fêtes of the new Court of Napoleon. He became, in fact, a kind of unofficial master of the ceremonies, and, in this capacity, assisted at all the solemn functions of the Empire, notably at the marriage of Napoleon and Marie Louise, of which event he has left an interesting account in his *Souvenirs*. When the Empire fell, he found himself out of employment ; but in 1815 received the appointments of inspector-general of Court entertainments and professor of dancing and deportment at the École Royale de Musique.

The *ménage* Despréaux-Guimard resided, in these last years, in the Rue de Ménars, where the *ex-danseuse* surrounded herself with a large circle of friends. Often the conversation turned on the past triumphs of Mlle. Guimard, when the younger members of the company would express their regret that it was impossible for them to form an idea of that marvellous talent which, for a whole generation, had so enchanted the patrons of the Opera, and would beg their hostess to give them a few steps of the ballets in which she had achieved her greatest successes. At first, the ballerina refused, on the score of her age and the decline of her physical powers. But the ingenious Despréaux erected in the salon a theatre, the curtain of which was so arranged as to reveal only the knee and the legs of the actors. And here he and his wife, concealing thus all the ravages that time had wrought upon face and figure, danced with legs and feet which seemed to the delighted spectators to have preserved all the grace and suppleness of youth.

Later, when increasing years and feeble health had caused her to retire altogether from society, if one of the few intimate friends who were still admitted to the



house happened to refer to her glorious past at the Opera, the old artiste would sometimes offer to amuse her visitors with what she called her theatre. With that, she would draw from under her fauteuil a little drum, which she would place between her feet on a foot-stool. Then she would join two of her fingers, bow, lift the curtain, announce some ballet, and, by a marvel of memory and agility of hand, dance with her two fingers all the steps of this ballet—her own steps, and the steps of those who preceded, and of those who had doubled her—with such correctness as to make her audience appreciate the superiority of her own dancing.<sup>1</sup>

On May 4, 1816, Madeleine Guimard—or rather Madame Despréaux—died at the age of seventy-three; the death of the famous *danseuse* of the eighteenth century passing almost unnoticed in this Paris of the Restoration, which seemed to have already forgotten her dazzling triumphs of yesterday.

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Guimard*, p. 301.

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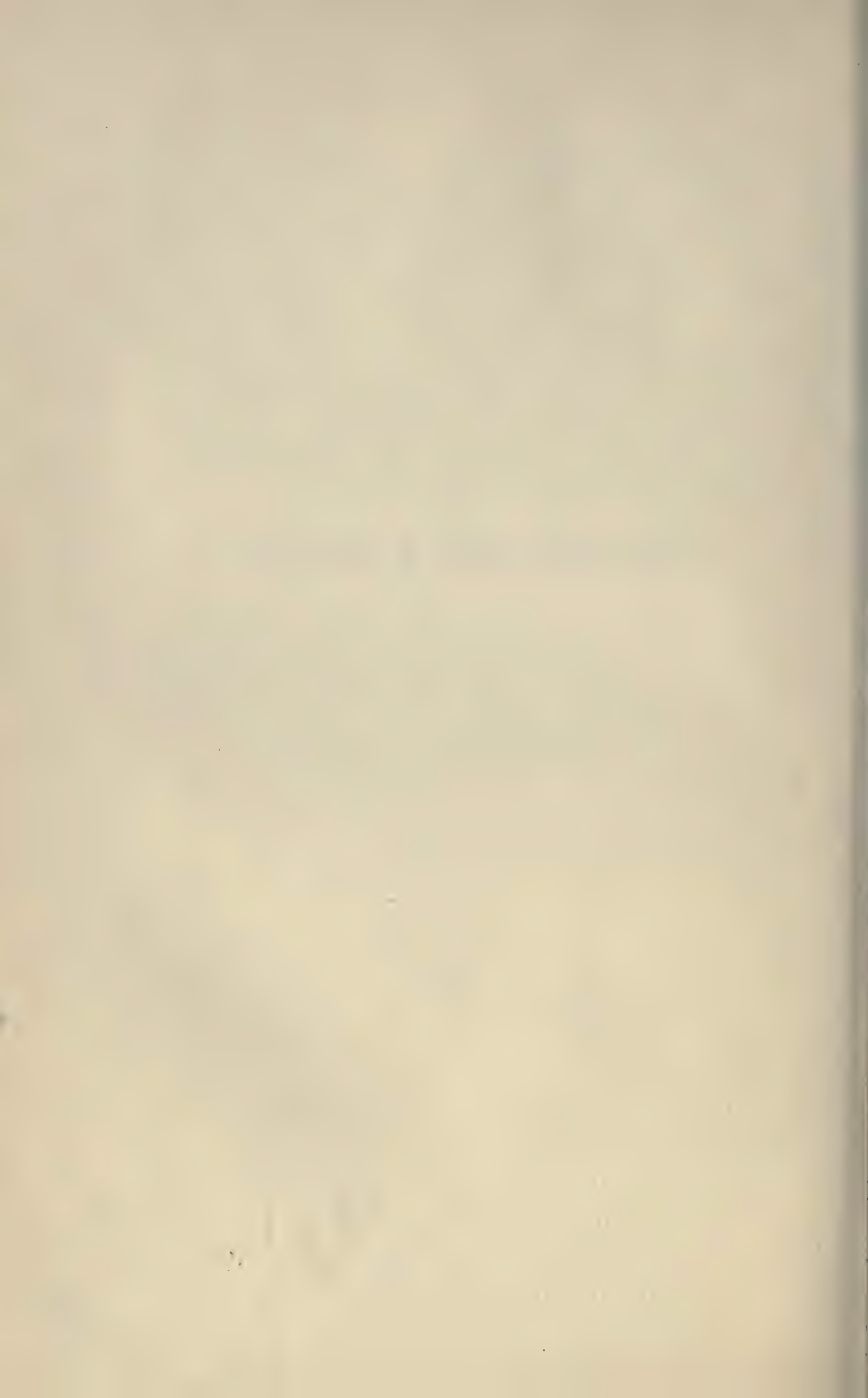
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III

MADemoiselle RAUCOURT





### III

#### MADemoiselle RAUCOURT

SEVERAL versions have at different times been current in regard to the origin of Mlle. Raucourt. According to the one which, until comparatively recent years, found almost general acceptance, her baptismal name was Françoise Marie Antoinette Clairien; she was born at Dombasle, on November 29, 1753, and was the daughter of "a poor barber overwhelmed with children," who consigned her to the care of the village postmaster, a person called François Saucerotte, by whom she was adopted.<sup>1</sup> That a child of that name was born at Dombasle, on the above-mentioned date, is true enough; but she was not the future *tragédienne*. The actress in question was born in Paris, on March 3, 1756; François Saucerotte was her own, and not her adopted, father, and she was baptized at the church of Saint-Severin, by the name of Marie Antoinette Joseph, as witness the *acte de naissance*, given by Auguste Jal, in his invaluable *Dictionnaire de Biographie et d'Histoire*:

"Wednesday, March 3, 1756.—Marie Antoinette Joseph, born to-day, daughter of François Saucerotte,

<sup>1</sup> Among the writers who have fallen into this error may be mentioned: Lemazurier (*Galerie historique des acteurs du Théâtre-Français*), M. de Manne (*Galerie historique de la troupe de Voltaire* and *Biographie générale*: Article, "Raucourt"), Émile Gaboriau (*Les Comédiennes adorées*), Mr. Sutherland Edwards ("Idols of the French Stage"), and Mr. Frederick Hawkins ("The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century").

bourgeois of Paris, and of Antoinette de la Porte, his wife, residing Rue de Vieille-Bouclerie. The godfather was Julien Mérel, labourer, the godmother, Marguerite Lancelin, *fille majeure*, both residing Rue du Bac. The godmother has declared herself unable to sign her name. (Signed) Mérel, Saucerotte."

What occupation was followed by François Saucerotte at the time of his daughter's birth is uncertain—*bourgeois de Paris* being a trifle indefinite. But, a few years later, he was seized with an ambition to become an actor and, accordingly, applied for and obtained an *ordre de début* at the Comédie-Française, where he appeared under the name of Raucourt. The *début*, however, was not a success; and the pit intimated its sense of M. Raucourt's shortcomings in so unmistakable a manner that, after his second appearance, that gentleman prudently decided to seek fame and fortune before a less critical audience. He accordingly retired to the provinces, and from thence migrated to Spain, as a member of a French travelling company, taking his little daughter with him. The latter, who early decided to follow her father's profession, amply atoned for any lack of ability on his part, and showed such extraordinary precocity that at the age of twelve she was already playing with success in several tragedy parts.

From Spain the Raucourts—to give them the name by which they were henceforth known—appear to have journeyed to St. Petersburg; but, towards the end of the year 1770, returned to France, where the girl obtained an engagement at Rouen, the conservatoire of the Paris theatres. Here she acted with such success, notably as Euphémie in De Belloy's *Gaston et Bayard*, that the fame of her talent soon reached the capital and she



received an order from the Gentlemen of the Chamber to make her *début* at the Comédie-Française.

Mlle. Raucourt and her father arrived in Paris in the spring of 1772, where they rented a modest apartment in the Rue Saint-Jacques, for though rich in hopes, their purses were light. Provincial players in those days gained abundant experience, but very little money.

The young actress's first appearance at the Comédie-Française was preceded by some months of study, under the direction of Brizard, who was as excellent a teacher as he was an actor, and, delighted with his pupil's intelligence and industry, did not rest content until he had taught her everything he knew. In the course of a few weeks, she is said to have mastered no less than nineteen important tragedy parts. From Brizard's hands, and at his suggestion, she passed to those of Mlle. Clairon; and the celebrated *tragédienne*, partly out of a real liking for the girl and partly out of a desire to set up a rival to Madame Vestris, with whom her relations were at that time very strained, spared no pains to put the finishing touch to the actor's work.<sup>1</sup>

At length, towards the end of the year, Mlle. Raucourt was deemed worthy to challenge the verdict of the

<sup>1</sup> Mlle. Clairon subsequently wrote to Larive: "Mlle. Raucourt has made her *début* with the greatest success. All Paris dotes on her, and, although Brizard may be her only recognised master, people name, at each verse which they hear her utter, the person of whom she has taken lessons. She is only sixteen and a half; she is beautiful as an angel, sensible, noble. She will be, I hope, a charming subject, and I dare believe that Madame Vestris will gnaw her fingers, more than once, at having disoblinded me. . . . This woman is the first person whom I have really hated. Mlle. Raucourt is worthy of all the pains that I am taking to form her, but I confess that I find it very sweet, while serving her, to avenge myself for all the ingratitude and insolence of the other." Cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 285.

Parisians, and, on December 23, 1772, she made her *début*, as Dido, in Le Franc de Pompignan's famous tragedy, being then within rather more than two months of completing her seventeenth year.

And what a *début* it was ! Never in the whole history of the theatre had so young an actress secured so brilliant, so extraordinary, a triumph. "Before the tragedy began," says Grimm, "Brizard himself harangued the pit, demanded its indulgence for a budding talent, and assured it that his pupil, formed by the criticisms of the public, would one day be its work. The pit, which loves to the point of folly actors to address it, particularly when they call it the arbiter of tastes and of talents, warmly applauded the harangue of Achates Brizard.<sup>1</sup> But when it beheld the most beautiful and the most noble creature in the world advance, in the character of Dido, to the edge of the stage ; when it heard the sweetest, the most flexible, the most harmonious, the most impressive of voices ; when it remarked a style of acting full of dignity, intelligence, and the most subtle and delicate shades, the enthusiasm of the public knew no bounds. They raised cries of admiration and applause ; they involuntarily embraced one another ; they were perfectly intoxicated. When the play was over, the enthusiasm spread to their houses. Those who had been present at *Didon* dispersed to their various quarters, arrived like men demented, spoke with transports of the *débutante*, communicated their enthusiasm to those who had not seen her, and at every supper-table in Paris nothing was heard save the name of Raucourt."<sup>2</sup>

Mlle. Raucourt had risen that morning unknown,

<sup>1</sup> Brizard played the part of *fidus* Achates in *Didon*.

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, Supplementary volume, p. 352.

at least so far as Paris was concerned ; she retired to bed a celebrity, the idol of the playgoing public. All the gazettes, all the journals, all the correspondence of the time, resounded with her praises. "Nature," wrote the dramatic critic of the *Mercure*, "appears to have lavished its gifts upon her : she is beautiful, she is impressive in all her rôles, she possesses a kind of innate aptitude for tragedy, and the most triumphant means of giving expression to its energy, its sentiment, and its passion ; a voice flexible, sonorous, and well-modulated ; a physiognomy which depicts the affections of the heart in all their variations ; a look eloquent and expressive, the art of speaking to the eyes and of investing her by-play with interest. This young actress has received everything from beneficent Nature, and study and experience have had little to do with perfecting and completing her talents." <sup>1</sup> Grimm predicted that she would be the "*gloire immortelle*" of the French stage. Another critic declared the annihilation of the British fleet alone could have aroused a deeper enthusiasm than her acting ; while the *Mémoires secrets* hailed her as a veritable prodigy : "It is impossible to describe the sensation she has created ; nothing like it has been seen within the memory of living man. She is only sixteen and a half ; she is a study for a painter. She has the most noble, the most dramatic face, the most enchanting voice, a prodigious intelligence ; she did not make a single false intonation. Throughout the whole of her very difficult part, she did not commit the slightest error, not even an inappropriate gesture. A little stiffness and embarrassment in the movements of her arms is the only fault people have been able to find in her." <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mercure de France*, January 1773.

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, vi. 288.



Let us here remark that all this eulogy was very far from being deserved, and that the critics ere long found reason to modify their enthusiasm. Mlle. Raucourt was unquestionably a very handsome girl, and certainly possessed many of the qualities attributed to her by her admirers; but she never attained anything like the standard of excellence of Adrienne Lecouvreur, or Mlle. Dumesnil, or Mlle. Clairon. "With a little sensibility," remarks one of her colleagues of the Comédie-Française, "she might have been the greatest of *tragédiennes*; but that quality, so invaluable on the stage, was wanting." She was wanting also in versatility; her acting was, so to speak, all of a piece; she sinned in excess of force and energy, and never mastered the art of varying her intonations, what Mlle. Clairon called "the eloquence of sounds." No one knew better than did she how to give expression to the great passions: hatred, jealousy, revenge. She was admirable in the Agrippine of *Britannicus*, inimitable in the Jocaste of *Œdipe*. But the more human, the more tender passions: pity, tenderness, love, were unknown to her. Thus her rendering of Phèdre, the greatest character of the classic répertoire, was never more than moderately successful, and compared very unfavourably with that of Mlle. Dumesnil.<sup>1</sup>

However, the public having with one accord decided to place the new actress on a pedestal and fall down before her, was, for the time being, blind to her shortcomings. Its enthusiasm increased with each performance, until it reached a veritable frenzy. On the days on which she was to appear, the box-office of the theatre was literally besieged from an early hour in the morning.

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 73. Manne, *Galerie historique de la troupe de Voltaire*.

Servants sent by their employers to secure places discharged their mission at the risk of their lives; several were carried away in an unconscious state, and one is said to have died, as the result of the injuries he received. Tickets for the pit, costing twenty-four sous, were sold for nine or ten francs apiece, in the court of the Tuileries, by persons who had been intrepid enough to secure them; the prices of the other places rising in the same proportion. The days of the Rue Quincampoix seemed to have returned.

When the time for the performance drew near, the scene almost baffled description. All the approaches to the Comédie-Française were so blocked with people that the actors themselves could with difficulty persuade their excited patrons to make way for them. An enormous crowd surged round the theatre, forced the doors, and struggled and fought for the best places in the pit. Those who, by good fortune or superior physical strength, emerged triumphant from the *mêlée*, arrived panting for breath, with their clothes nearly torn from their backs, dishevelled hair, and faces streaming with perspiration. "Do you think," inquired an old lady, in Grimm's hearing, one evening, "that if it had been a question of saving their country, these people would have exposed themselves like this?"

The enthusiasm of the town spread to the Court, and, on January 5, the new actress was commanded to appear at Versailles, where she seems to have created a similar sensation. Louis XV., despite his indifference to tragedy, sat out *Didon* to the end, sent for Mlle. Raucourt and, after warmly complimenting her, presented her to the Dauphiness, as the Queen of Carthage. He also made her a present of fifty louis, and gave orders

that she should be received as a member of the Comédie without being required to give any further proofs of her talent. Madame du Barry hastened to follow his Majesty's example, and offered the young actress the choice of three dresses for her private use, or a *robe de théâtre*. To which the girl replied that she would prefer the stage costume, "since, in that case, the public would profit by Madame la Comtesse's goodness as well as herself."<sup>1</sup>

After appearing four times in *Didon*, Mlle. Raucourt played the parts of Émilie, in *Cinna*, Monime, in *Mithridate*, Idamé, in Voltaire's *Orphelin de la Chine*, Hermione, in *Andromaque*, and, finally, that of Pulchérie, in *Héraculus*, in all of which rôles, Grimm tells us, "she showed the happiest dispositions and announced the greatest talents." The *furor* she excited, so far from diminishing, continued to increase, and not a day passed without some persons being more or less seriously injured in the struggle at the doors of the theatre. The climax of absurdity seems to have been reached a few evenings after her visit to Versailles, when her admirers in the pit clamoured for "a benefit performance for the new actress," and refused to allow the play to proceed until the management had announced their willingness to accede to their patrons' wishes, provided the Gentlemen of the Chamber would accord them permission.

In the meanwhile, the triumphs of Mlle. Raucourt, the ovations of which she was every evening the recipient, had begun to arouse the alarm and jealousy of her col-

<sup>1</sup> Grimm writes: "The Princesse de Beauvau, the Princesse de Guéménée, and the Duchesse de la Vallière have also made her presents of superb dresses. The greater part of those which the ladies of the Court had had made for the Dauphin's marriage will go to enrich the theatrical wardrobe of Mlle. Raucourt, which will soon be of considerable size."



leagues. The two leading actresses of the company, Madame Vestris and Mlle. Sainval the elder,<sup>1</sup> had been for some time mortal enemies; but, in the presence of this newcomer, who had in a single night relegated them both to secondary places in the affections of the fickle public, they recognised the wisdom of forgetting their differences for the nonce and making common cause against the interloper. They organised a cabal; they filled the pit with their personal friends and with hired agents, instructed to interrupt the finest tirades of Mlle. Raucourt with jeers and hisses, and, behind the scenes, they did everything in their power to render their young rival's life a burden to her. Their intrigues were fruitless, nay more, they recoiled upon their own heads. The voices of the malcontents were drowned in the bursts of applause, which increased in volume and frequency the moment it became known that an opposition was at work. So indignant were the audience that any shortcomings on the part of its idol were at once attributed to the machinations of her jealous rivals. One evening, when playing Monime, she forgot her part. "It is all the fault of those Sainvals," said the indignant *parterre*. On another, a cat happened to stray on to the stage and interrupted the performance with plaintive cries. "I will wager that that cat belongs to Madame Vestris!" cried a wag in the pit; and the sally was followed by a roar of derisive laughter.<sup>2</sup> The intriguers found themselves covered with ridicule; while Mlle. Raucourt's position grew stronger every day.

The extraordinary popularity of Mlle. Raucourt

<sup>1</sup> The name is frequently written Saint-Val.

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, vi. p. 297.

with the playgoing public was enhanced by an unsullied reputation off the stage. "I understand," writes Grimm, "that this charming creature, so imposing on the stage, is very simple in private life; that she has all the candour and innocence of her age, and occupies with girlish amusements the time not set apart for study. Many dissertations have been written with the view of discovering metaphysically by what power a girl so young and innocent can represent with so much power on the stage the transports and the fury of love." He adds that so determined was her father to defend her chastity that he invariably carried two loaded pistols "in order to blow out the brains of the first who should make an attempt on the virtue of his daughter."<sup>1</sup>

M. Raucourt indeed followed his talented daughter about like her shadow; to the theatre, on her shopping expeditions, to the private houses to which she was invited. During the performances, he mounted sentinel in the wings, to be ready to place himself at her side the moment she made her exit. People compared him to a jealous lover keeping watch over a flighty mistress.

All these precautions, however, were quite unnecessary. Mlle. Raucourt was virtuous, or rather she was virtue itself. "In vain was her heart besieged like the box-office of the theatre on the evenings on which she was to appear; in vain her adorers prostrated themselves before her. She turned a deaf ear to the most brilliant propositions; she repulsed with horror the most tempting offers."

Soon the virtue of Mlle. Raucourt became as celebrated as her talent; it was the talk of the town; the

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, Supplementary volume, p. 356.

memoirs and correspondence of the time are full of it. "The virtue of the new actress still keeps up." "The virtue of the new actress resists the numerous assaults to which it is subjected." "The new actress has begun to give *petits soupers*, which, it is hoped, may lead to what she has hitherto escaped." And so forth.

It cannot be said that the young woman lacked encouragement to persevere in a course which, for an actress in those days, was as laudable as it was novel. Every evening the theatre resounded with acclamations, which were intended to be as much a tribute to her exemplary conduct as to her beauty and talent. Devout ladies of the Court vied with one another in giving her good advice and in enriching her wardrobe; and all manner of flattering epithets were bestowed upon her. She was "Jeanne d'Arc at the Comédie-Française," "the Wise Virgin in the midst of the foolish ones," "Diana with the features of Venus."

Nor was material encouragement wanting, as the following anecdote will show :

"January 20, 1773.—Mlle. Raucourt continues to create the greatest sensation. It is reported that the other day a man entered her dressing-room, who informed her that she could judge from his age and his appearance that he was not prompted by any unlawful motive, but that he was guided solely by a profound sentiment of admiration for her talent; that he entreated her not to be offended with one who, in his enthusiasm, desired to give her proofs of his esteem by a little tribute which he would lay upon her toilette-table; and forthwith deposited there two rouleaux of one hundred louis each." Mlle. Raucourt, the chronicler adds, graciously replied that it was impossible for her to refuse a gift offered in



such terms, and the gentleman departed, without making himself known.<sup>1</sup>

A few days later, the lady received an anonymous offer of 12,000 francs a year, "for so long as she remained chaste." The writer went on to say that if she decided not to do so, and would grant him the preference, the pension should be doubled. The *Nouvelles à la main*, which reports this incident, informs its readers that it is not yet known which offer Mlle. Raucourt had decided to accept; but since the anonymous "benefactor" was commonly understood to be none other than a Prince of the Blood, the Duc de Bourbon to wit, it would be scarcely reasonable to expect her to continue inflexible.

The young actress, nevertheless, would accept nothing from the duke, and her refusal placed the *comble* upon her fame. Her enemies declared that she must be "not a woman at all, but a monster"; her idolators could find no words in which to express their admiration.

Voltaire was the first to besmirch the spotless reputation of Mlle. Raucourt. It is said that so much fuss about the virtue of an actress irritated him, and that he was annoyed because the girl's successes in the classic répertoire had caused the production of his *Lois de Minos*, from which he expected great things, to be indefinitely postponed. As, however, Voltaire, with all his faults, was incapable of deliberately slandering a woman, it is probable that he acted in good faith, prompted by a desire to unmask a hypocrite. Circumstance sometimes obliged the Patriarch to play the hypocrite himself; but he hated hypocrisy in others; and the news that a young *débutante*, solely on account of an undeserved reputation for virtue, was being exalted above his beloved

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*.

Adrienne Lecouvreur and his favourite interpreter, Mlle. Clairon, may well have filled him with righteous indignation.

However that may be, he wrote to his friend, the Maréchal de Richelieu, that he was informed, on excellent authority, that, while in Spain, the supposed immaculate Raucourt had been the mistress of a gentleman from Geneva, who had been travelling in that country.

As ill-luck would have it, when the letter arrived, Mlle. Raucourt was dining at Richelieu's house, chaperoned, it is hardly necessary to observe, by her vigilant father; young ladies who valued their reputations did not go unprotected to visit that evergreen sinner. D'Alembert, the Princesse de Beauveau, and Mlle. Clairon's sometime adorer, the Marquis de Ximenès, were also present. As every one was anxious to know what the great man had to say, Richelieu, without opening the letter, handed it to Ximenès, with a request that he would read it to the company. The marquis complied, and proceeded until he had uttered the fatal sentence, when he stopped abruptly and began mumbling apologies. Terrible was the commotion which ensued. Mlle. Raucourt promptly swooned away; her father drew his sword, swearing that he would proceed to Ferney and run the Patriarch through the body; the Princesse de Beauveau called the maladroit marquis a fool; while wicked old Richelieu, we may presume, looked on choking with suppressed mirth.

On the morrow, the story was all over Paris. The first feeling was one of incredulity—people are always slow to believe that idols of their own creation have feet of clay—and both Court and town took the side of the outraged actress, and declared that she had been grossly

calumniated. D'Alembert reported the scene at the marshal's house, and the feeling which his accusation had aroused, to Voltaire, who, perhaps alarmed for the future reception of his tragedies, hastened to pour the balm of his flattery upon the wound which he had inflicted: "I am the aged Æson, and you the enchantress Medea." "I have scarcely left to me eyes to see, a soul to admire, a hand to write to you." And then he breaks forth into verse:

"Raucourt, tes talents enchanteurs  
Chaque jour te font des conquêtes,  
Tu fais soupirer tous les cœurs,  
Tu fais tourner toutes les têtes.

. . . . .  
L'art d'attendrir et de charmer  
A paré ta brillante aurore,  
Mais ton cœur est fait pour aimer,  
Et ce cœur ne dit rien encore."

But the mischief was done: no amount of epistles or madrigals could repair it. Gradually people began to think that there might have been more truth in the story about the Genevese lover than they had at first supposed; Voltaire, they reflected, lived close to Geneva, and was probably well informed. Mlle. Raucourt's many adorers took courage; they redoubled their attentions; they refused any longer to believe her indignant protestations. Nothing, as the actor Fleury observes, is more dangerous to virtue than such incredulity, nothing more disheartening than to make sacrifices in which the world does not believe. Whether Voltaire's accusation was true or not, certain it is that Mlle. Raucourt ere long came to the conclusion that she had made sacrifices enough, and one fine day the town "learned with stupefaction" that at Compiègne, where the troupe of the



Comédie-Française was giving a series of performances before the Court, the impregnable virtue of its idol had at length succumbed.

It was at first reported that the fortress had surrendered to no less a person than the King himself. "No one expected this *début*," writes a Parisian staying at Compiègne, "which is not likely to meet with the success of *Didon*. But she has an excuse. What woman can resist her King?"

Soon, however, this rumour was contradicted. It was not his Most Christian Majesty, but his Prime Minister, the Duc d'Aiguillon, who had triumphed over the resistance of the lady. A more unfortunate choice for an actress who wished to retain her popularity with the Parisians could not have been made. Next to the Chancellor, Maupeou, and the Comptroller-General, the Abbé Terrai, d'Aiguillon was the best-hated man in France.

Mlle. Raucourt's intimacy with the Minister lasted but a very short time; it was merely a *galanterie*. But, in March 1774, we learn that she is living openly under the protection of the Marquis de Bièvre, a young officer of Musketeers, with some literary pretensions,<sup>1</sup> who had paid her debts, amounting, it was said, to 40,000 livres, made a settlement upon her, and allowed her a handsome sum per month, for current expenses.

The once modest and retiring young actress, as if resolved to atone for the strict decorum she had formerly imposed upon herself, now lived a life of the utmost luxury and extravagance. She had ten or twelve horses in her stables, rented two or three houses, and kept

<sup>1</sup> He was the author of a highly successful comedy, called *Le Séducteur*, produced at the Comédie-Française, November 8, 1783.

fifteen servants, while her toilettes were the envy and despair of all feminine Paris. On Good Friday, she drove to the Abbey of Longchamps, in the train of Mlle. Duthé and Mlle. Cléophile, the innamorata of the Spanish Ambassador, two of the most extravagant courtesans of the time, "in a pompous equipage drawn by four horses." "The carriage was of an apple-green colour, encrusted with different coloured stones, the mountings of the harness were of silver, and the reins of crimson silk." The chronicler adds that it is common belief that M. de Bièvre is not the only person who pays for these luxuries.

Soon M. de Bièvre was discarded and, "after some excursions into the Court and financial circles," Mlle. Raucourt accepted the protection of another marquis, de Villette, the dissipated husband of Voltaire's "*Belle et Bonne*." M. de Villette's reign was even shorter than that of his predecessor in the lady's affections, and far from a tranquil one. Not content with doing her very best to ruin him by her extravagance, his mistress tried to inveigle him into a duel with the architect Belanger, over some epigram which Sophie Arnould had made at her expense, and was highly indignant when poor Villette, who was of a peace-loving disposition, declined to humour her. After a few weeks, they quarrelled violently over money matters and parted on very bad terms, but not before the marquis had, by a letter to the gazettes, taken the whole town into his confidence in regard to the way the lady had treated him.

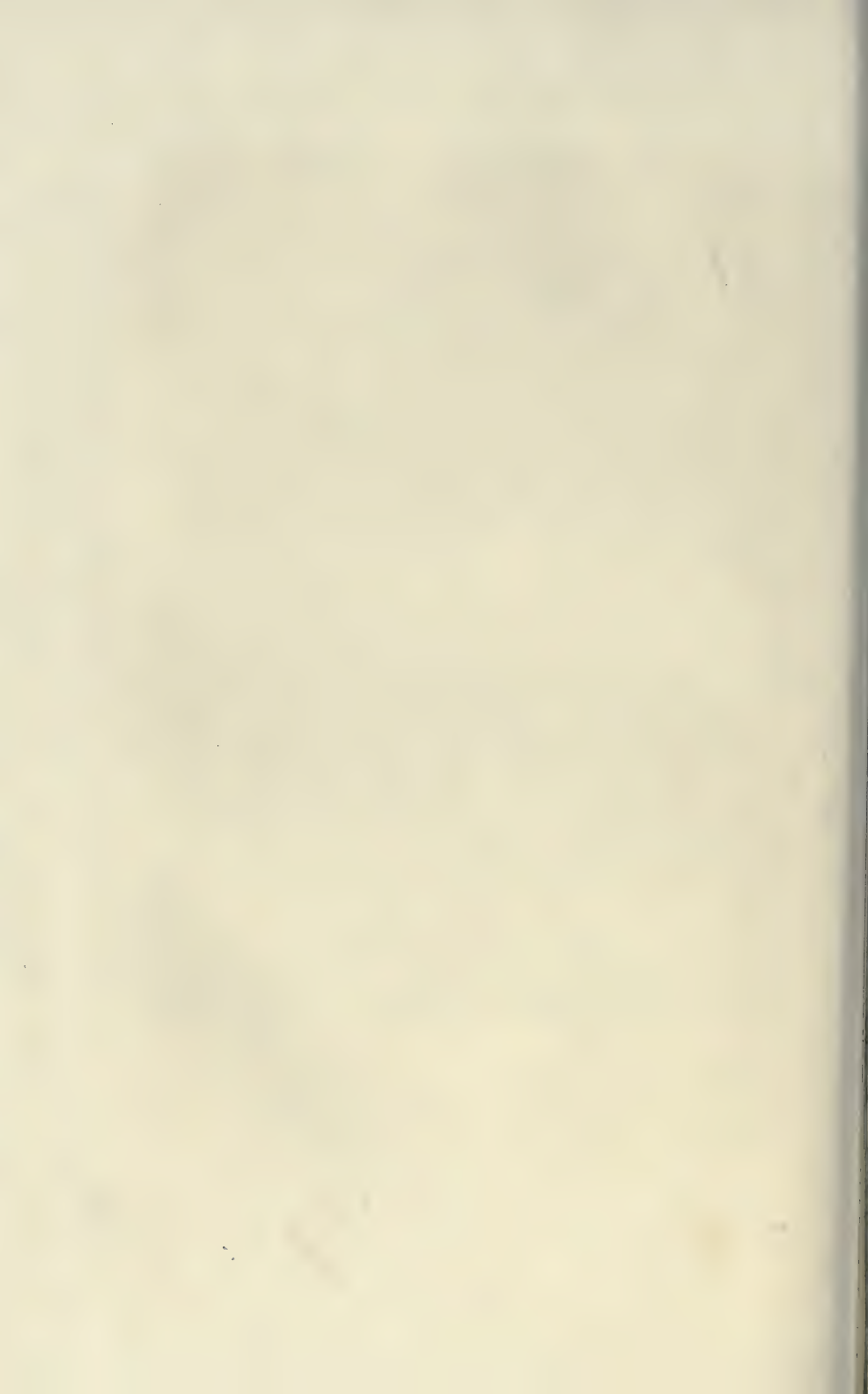
Mlle. Raucourt's conduct grew worse and worse; soon she had become perfectly reckless. Women like Camargo, Clairon, Guimard, Gaussin, and Sophie Arnould had been lax enough in their morals; but, at least, they had been capable of more or less disinterested



MADemoisELLE RAUCOURT

From an engraving by RUOTTE after the painting by GROS in the Collection of  
Mr. A. M. Broadley





attachments, and had, moreover, generally contrived to cast a veil over their worst irregularities. Mlle. Raucourt seemed as heartless as she was indifferent to public opinion. She passed from gallantry to gallantry; she ruined foolish young men and then laughed at their folly, cynically observing that "women were the most expensive of all tastes"; she flaunted her profligacy in the face of all Paris, and contracted immense debts, which there was no possibility of her being able to discharge. "In the space of a few months," writes Grimm, "she astonished Court and town, as much by the excess of her irregularities as she had by the rare prodigy of her innocence. She scandalised even those who were least susceptible to scandal."

The day of reckoning was not long in arriving. Her renown as a *tragédienne* disappeared with her reputation for virtue; and this actress who, at the time of her *début*, had been vaunted as the superior of Dumesnil and Clairon, was soon to become one of the most striking examples in theatrical history of the fickleness of the mob. The public decided that it had been the dupe of an unscrupulous hypocrite and burned with righteous indignation. Soon detractors arose: they declared that the young actress had no soul, no sensibility; that her delivery was stilted and artificial; that she indulged too freely in gesticulation; that her acting lacked restraint, and that her voice—that "sweetest, most flexible, most harmonious, most enchanting of voices"—was harsh and unpleasant. They found fault with her figure: her waist was too long, her arms too thin. Finally, they even denied the beauty of her face, on the ground that it was too masculine. "It was as though a bandage had fallen from the eyes of the public"

There can be very little doubt that Mlle. Raucourt's acting was now distinctly inferior to what it had been at the time of her first appearance at the Comédie-Française. A dissipated life does not conduce to success in any profession, and it would appear that, so far from making any progress, she had neglected her studies to the point of forgetting much of what Brizard and Mlle. Clairon had been at such pains to teach her. Still, as we have said elsewhere, her talents had been absurdly overrated, and a reaction was bound to set in sooner or later. That it came so quickly, however, and assumed so violent a form was the result of circumstances entirely unconnected with her art.

Her reception as Hermione, in *Andromaque*, in March 1774, was the first sign of the coming storm. According to the *Mémoires secrets*, the acting all round on this occasion left a good deal to be desired; but the public, who had just learned that Mlle. Raucourt was living openly with the Marquis de Bièvre, concentrated its resentment upon her, and she was loudly hissed.

The hostile demonstrations grew more frequent and more pronounced in proportion as the actress's irregularities became more notorious. Nevertheless, so long as there was nothing worse than innumerable gallantries with which to reproach her, she was not without supporters in the pit, whose acclamations served to counteract, if not entirely to drown, the cries of the malcontents. Presently, however, ugly rumours began to spread—rumours which attributed to the young *tragédienne* the shameful vices of ancient Greece, and which, there is reason to believe, were but too well justified.<sup>1</sup> Every

<sup>1</sup>For further information concerning this unpleasant subject, into which we naturally do not care to enter, see Edmond de Goncourt's *Maison d'un*



one now turned against her ; those who had been loudest in chanting her praises were now foremost in ridicule and abuse, and such was the general odium which she had contrived to excite that she counted herself fortunate if her appearance on the stage was received in silence. "Never," wrote Grimm, "was idol worshipped with more infatuation ; never was idol broken with more contempt."

There was, however, a slight reaction in her favour when, on October 30, 1775, she appeared as the Statue, in the *Pygmalion* of Jean Jacques Rousseau. "She was truly beautiful in this pose," says the critic of the *Mémoires secrets*. "It is considered the most successful part she has yet undertaken." And La Harpe writes : "This rôle, which would be suitable for so few women, is precisely that which is most becoming to Mlle. Raucourt. The only thing required of her is to be beautiful, and in that she is a complete success. It is impossible to imagine a more seductive vision than this actress, as she poses on her pedestal at the moment when the veil which has hitherto covered her is drawn aside. Her head was that of Venus, and her leg, half-discovered, that of Diana."<sup>1</sup>

But this was, after all, only a respite. Soon her humiliations recommenced. Her rivals, Madame Vestris and the elder Mlle. Sainval, powerless, as we have seen, to injure her, so long as she retained her popularity, had not been slow to take advantage of the change in public feeling. A cabal was formed against her at the theatre ; she was systematically entrusted with parts quite unsuited

*artiste*, ii. 60, and the same writer's *Sophie Arnould*, p. 86. A similar charge was brought against Sophie Arnould, though, apparently, with less reason.

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, ii. 282.

to her style of acting, and sometimes called upon, at a few hours' notice, to appear in characters which she had only partially studied. Thus, during a revival of *Britannicus*, Mlle. Dumesnil, happening to fall ill, the luckless young actress found herself suddenly compelled to play Agrippine, a rôle which, though in later years one of her most successful impersonations, was at this time almost unknown to her. Before the play began, d'Auberval, who by no means approved of the proceedings of the cabal, came before the curtain, informed the pit of Mlle. Dumesnil's indisposition, and begged its indulgence for her substitute. His request was of no avail; and poor Mlle. Raucourt met with such a reception that she fainted and had to be carried off the stage.

To the intrigues of her rivals and the insults of the pit were now added the importunities and threats of her creditors. In the four years she had been a member of the Comédie-Française she had, besides spending immense sums belonging to her infatuated admirers, contrived to run into debt to the extent of something like 300,000 livres, and went in hourly fear of arrest. At length, the situation became intolerable, and she resolved to seek safety in flight. "It was intended to produce the *Zuma* of M. Le Fèvre," writes Grimm, "when the compulsory disappearance of Mlle. Raucourt, who was to have played one of the principal parts, caused the rehearsals to be suddenly interrupted. Sudden as was her disappearance, it has occasioned little surprise."

Nothing was heard of the fugitive for six weeks, during which, it was subsequently ascertained, she had been hiding in the neighbourhood of Paris, disguised as a dragoon. A good-natured farmer, who mistook her for a young officer in trouble about a duel, had given her

shelter. At the end of that time she returned, to find that her name had been struck off the books of the Comédie-Française, and her place given to Mlle. Sainval the younger, who, received with enthusiasm on her *début*, had been subsequently altogether eclipsed by Mlle. Raucourt, and, for some time past, had been playing at Lyons.<sup>1</sup>

At first, Mlle. Raucourt took refuge in the Temple, the sanctuary of insolvent debtors, while some of the few friends still left to her negotiated with her creditors, with a view to obtaining a reprieve. Perhaps the creditors thought that, if time were given to her, the lady might contrive to secure some wealthy admirer, by whom their claims would be settled. Any way, they consented to accord her a few months' grace, and, in the autumn, Mlle. Raucourt left the Temple and went to live with a Madame Souck, "a German woman of horribly depraved morals," in the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis. Madame Souck, it transpired, had introduced Mlle. Raucourt into the house in the temporary absence of the landlord, who, on his return, found her established in a vacant suite of apartments, which she firmly declined to vacate. When he ventured to remonstrate, Madame Souck's servants threatened him with "*coups de bâton et autres violences*," and also maltreated one of his tenants, who would appear to have taken the landlord's part. So threatening, indeed, did the attitude of the two ladies and their domestics become that the poor landlord declared,

<sup>1</sup> The expelled actress may have derived some little consolation from perusing the following criticism of her successor in the *Nouvelles à la main*: "July 9.—Mlle. Sainval the younger made her first appearance yesterday, in *Zaire*, on her return to the Comédie. She is ugly, and particularly hideous when she weeps, ungraceful, flat-breasted, and has a doleful and monotonous voice."



in a complaint he lodged before a commissary of police, that he dared not even sleep in his own house, "for fear of accidents."<sup>1</sup>

Madame Souck's finances, like those of her friend, were in a parlous state, and, in the following spring, a firm of silk-merchants of the Rue Saint-Honoré levied an execution upon her premises, and placed one Thomas Philippe Violet and another bailiff in possession. Madame Souck, however, was not a lady to submit tamely to such inconvenience, and, on March 27, we find Thomas Philippe Violet appearing before a commissary of the Châtelet to lodge a complaint and demand protection against the dame Souck, the demoiselle Raucourt, and other persons, "their accomplices, abettors, and adherents." In this document, he declares that, on the night of the 25th to 26th inst., at two hours after midnight, the said dame Souck and the said demoiselle Raucourt, "both dressed in men's clothes," arrived, accompanied by the said accomplices, abettors, and adherents, and, after creating a terrible uproar and "swearing by the Holy Name of God," proceeded with blows and kicks to force the doors, and ejected both him and his colleague into the street.<sup>2</sup>

That same day, Mlle. Raucourt was arrested, at the suit of a usurer, who had grown tired of waiting for his money, and conveyed to For l'Évêque. Fortunately for her, she contrived to obtain her release before the news of her arrest had been noised abroad, in which case she would have had any number of detainers lodged against her, and might have remained under lock and key for an indefinite time. The Prince de Ligne, who had, or had formerly had, tender relations with Madame Souck,

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *Les Comédiens du Roi de la Troupe française*, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 255.

happened to be in Paris and, at the instance of that lady, intervened on the actress's behalf. He appears to have settled the usurer's claim and also to have encouraged a belief that he intended to pay all Mlle. Raucourt's debts. By this means the *tragédienne* obtained a fresh respite, which she employed in endeavouring to gain readmission to the Comédie-Française. In this she failed and, finding that her creditors were again on the point of taking up arms, she once more took to flight, and this time left the country, accompanied by her devoted friend, Madame Souck.

The movements of Mlle. Raucourt during the next two years are shrouded in mystery. All that is known for certain, is that she exploited North Germany, Poland, and Russia, and passed some time in Berlin and Warsaw. In July 1778, the *Nouvelles à la main* report that, at Hamburg, both she and Madame Souck had been arrested on a charge of swindling, and, having been whipped and branded, expelled from the city. This, however, was no doubt only malicious gossip spread about by the young actress's enemies, determined to keep not only the Comédie-Française, but France itself closed against her; and there was probably more truth in a story from Holland, to the effect that Mlle. Raucourt had become the mistress of a wealthy Russian nobleman and had "squandered in a very short time a large fortune."

In the meanwhile, great events were taking place in Paris. The alliance between Madame Vestris and Mlle. Sainval the elder, which their common jealousy of Mlle. Raucourt had called into being, had lasted only so long as the total discomfiture of that lady had rendered necessary. Its object accomplished, it was dissolved,

and the parties turned their weapons against each other. Counting upon the support of her lover, the Duc de Duras, who, in his capacity as First Gentleman of the Chamber, exercised a not altogether judicious control over the affairs of the Comédie-Française, Madame Vestris appropriated certain characters of the classic répertoire which Mlle. Sainval had hitherto regarded as her exclusive property. The latter angrily protested, and the matter was referred to the Gentlemen of the Chamber, who, at the instance of the Duc de Duras, decided in favour of Madame Vestris. This decision was followed by open war between the two actresses and their respective partisans; nothing else was talked of in the green-rooms, the cafés, and the salons of Paris, and very hard knocks were given and received.

Madame Vestris wrote to the *Journal de Paris*, to justify the course she had taken; Mlle. Sainval promptly replied; but the editor returned her letter, with an intimation that he had received instructions from a high quarter that no reply was to be inserted. Indignant at such injustice, the lady thereupon expanded her letter into a pamphlet, "in which M. de Duras was insulted, and the Queen even mentioned in a manner far from respectful."<sup>1</sup> Marie Antoniette, who, Madame Campan tells us, was accused, by implication, of leading the King by the nose, seems to have been rather amused than otherwise; but the duke was furious. The pamphlet had contained several of his private letters, and while all playgoing Paris was indignant at the partiality which these revealed, all literary Paris was making merry at the expense of an Academician who could not write his mother-tongue with even an approach to accuracy.

<sup>1</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, ii. 415.



The angry nobleman insisted that condign and exemplary punishment should be meted out to the offender, and poor Mlle. Sainval was expelled from the Comédie-Française, prohibited from performing in any provincial theatre, and exiled to Clermont, in Beauvoisis.<sup>1</sup> This high-handed action was bitterly resented by the public. Mlle. Sainval had been far more popular than her rival, whose relations with the Duc de Duras had caused her to be regarded as a minion of the Court, and the habitués of the pit now, almost to a man, declared in her favour. Madame Vestris's appearance on the stage was the signal for a storm of hisses; while, on the other hand, the younger sister of the disgraced actress was received with tumultuous cheering, and when, one evening, in the character of Aménaïde, in *Tancrède*, she pronounced the line,

“L'injustice à la fin produit l'indépendance,”

the applause absolutely shook the theatre. “Nothing was heard but cries of ‘Sainval! Sainval! *les deux* Sainval!’ The presence of the guard had no effect; the pit that night would have opposed a regiment.”

Alarmed by these demonstrations, the Gentlemen of the Chamber decided to mitigate the punishment inflicted upon the elder Sainval, who was, accordingly, granted permission to leave Clermont and to play in the provinces. Everywhere she was received with frantic enthusiasm. At Bordeaux, at the conclusion of the play, two cupids descended from a cloud to crown her with laurels, and the audience pelted her with flowers until the stage resembled a flower-garden.

By far the wisest course would have been to reinstate Mlle. Sainval at the Comédie-Française and thus deprive

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, “The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century,” ii. 250 *et seq.*

the turbulent patrons of that institution of any further excuse for demonstrations in her favour and against her rival. But, since the Gentlemen of the Chamber were of opinion that this would be too great a concession to popular clamour, it was decided to endeavour to direct public attention from Mlle. Sainval and her wrongs by recalling Mlle. Raucourt.

Madame Vestris herself seems to have been the first to suggest this step. She was, of course, well aware that if, by any chance, Mlle. Raucourt were to recover the place she had once held in the affections of the public, she herself would be completely overshadowed. But, since her own eclipse would undoubtedly be shared by Mlle. Sainval, whom she now hated far more than she ever had the younger actress, she was prepared to regard that eventuality with complacency.

Mlle. Raucourt, then at Berlin, was accordingly invited to return, and accepted the invitation readily enough, though it may be doubted whether she would have done so at all, could she have foreseen the kind of reception which awaited her. Her creditors, acting doubtless on a hint from an influential quarter, showed no disposition to molest her; but the scandals with which her name had been associated had not been forgotten. Every door was closed to her; no one could be persuaded to have any dealings with this "most compromising of women."

Friendless and without resources, she knew not where to go, when the good-natured Sophie Arnould offered her hospitality. It was a courageous act on the ex-singer's part, since her own and Mlle. Raucourt's enemies did not hesitate to attribute it to the most shameful motives. The same abominable charge which had been

brought against the *tragédienne* was now openly levelled at her.

Sophie, however, cared very little what people might say about her. Not content with extending her hospitality to the proscribed actress, she did everything in her power to interest her friends in favour of her *protégée*. To please his mistress, the Prince d'Hénin became one of Mlle. Raucourt's warmest partisans, and used all his not inconsiderable influence to break down the social quarantine to which she was subjected.

Mlle. Raucourt's reinstatement at the Comédie-Française was more easily proposed than accomplished. The majority of her former colleagues opposed it most strenuously, on the ground that their statutes prohibited the readmission of a player who had been excluded by a vote of the *sociétaires*, and that the misconduct of the actress in question had injured the company in the estimation of the public. The Gentlemen of the Chamber, however, turned a deaf ear to their remonstrances. Marie Antoinette, a great admirer of Mlle. Raucourt's acting, and ever ready to take the part of any of her sex whom she considered to have been hardly treated, espoused her cause, and even talked of paying her debts, and on September 11, 1779, the *Journal de Paris* contained the following announcement :

"Comédie-Française.—We understand that the demoiselle Raucourt, absent from this theatre for three years, will reappear there this evening, in the rôle of Dido."

Dido, it will be remembered, was the part in which the actress had made her sensational *début*, seven years before; and the recollection of the triumph she had secured on that occasion had doubtless influenced her



choice of this rôle. Now, as then, the doors of the theatre were besieged, and the *salle* crowded to its utmost capacity. But alas! how different were the feelings which animated the expectant audience! Mlle. Raucourt had been thrust upon the town in defiance of feelings which ought to have been respected; night after night the pit had clamoured for Mlle. Sainval, and, in her stead, it had been given—Raucourt! And to make matters worse, it was an open secret that the Court intended to pay her debts “out of the people’s money.”

Long before the curtain rose, angry murmurs heralded the coming storm, and the moment Dido appeared, it burst in all its fury. The uproar was indescribable. Hisses, groans, and cat-calls came from all parts of the pit. The grossest epithets, the most shocking abuse, were showered upon the unfortunate actress. “It was impossible,” says one account, “to hear a single word of her part. The other actors were allowed to speak, but so soon as her turn arrived, the clamour began again. It is suspected that the partisans of the demoiselles Sainval are no strangers to this fermentation.”

Even more violent was the hostility displayed when, two nights later, Mlle. Raucourt appeared as Phèdre. All who are familiar with Racine’s famous tragedy know that the part of the hapless heroine contains many lines which may be readily applied to her impersonator by a hostile audience, and, in electing to play it, Mlle. Raucourt furnished her enemies with weapons of which they did not fail to make the very fullest use. The well-known lines once addressed by Adrienne Lecouvreur to her rival and would-be assassin, the Duchesse de Bouillion:

“ Je sais mes perfidies,  
 CEnone, et ne suis pas de ces femmes hardies,  
 Qui, goûtant dans la crime une tranquille paix,  
 Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais,”

were greeted with cries of dissent and uproarious laughter.  
 The words,

“ De l’austère pudeur les bornes sont passées . . . ”

were answered with shouts of “ *C’est vrai ! c’est vrai !  
 il y a longtemps !* While when she came to the passage  
 in which Phèdre, in an agony of remorse, exclaims,

“ Et moi, triste rebut de la nature entière . . . ”

the ironical cheering, La Harpe tells us, seemed as if  
 it would never cease. “ Neither her beauty nor her  
 sex,” writes Grimm, “ could protect her any longer, and  
 never did the public go so far in forgetfulness of its own  
 dignity.”

For these disgraceful scenes, the Duc de Duras  
 seems to have been, in no small measure, responsible.  
 In his anxiety to secure a hearing for Mlle. Raucourt,  
 this well-meaning but maladroit nobleman had foolishly  
 endeavoured to overawe the opposition by trebling the  
 guard and “ filling the pit with policemen,” who pounced  
 upon and conducted to prison the most prominent of  
 the disturbers. Such tactics naturally had the effect  
 of exasperating the malcontents to the last degree  
 and of alienating many whose sympathies had hitherto  
 lain with the persecuted actress. “ While the Comte  
 d’Estaing is fighting the English, to make them recog-  
 nise the independence of America,” it was bitterly said,  
 “ the Duc de Duras imprisons Frenchmen for refusing  
 to applaud Raucourt ! ”

Nevertheless, fair-minded persons appear to have been practically unanimous in condemning the conduct of the pit. "Nothing," writes La Harpe, "can prove more clearly that the spirit of the *parterre* is changed. The excesses in which it indulges, unknown until now, show how badly composed it is. Never would an assembly of respectable persons permit itself to say to a woman, whatever she might be, that she was '*le rebut de la nature entière*.' One can decline to listen to her, but it is shocking and abominable to go to such lengths as this." He adds that, in his opinion, the disturbance was organised by the elder Mlle. Sainval, "who knows better than any one how to set to work the crowd of venal ruffians who compose to-day a third of the *parterre*, and sometimes make themselves its masters"; and declares that so disgusted is he with the cabals and acrimonious quarrels which divide the theatrical and literary worlds, that he has determined to abandon dramatic criticism altogether, and has, accordingly, resigned his post on the *Mercur*.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of such bitter hostility as she was called upon to encounter, Mlle. Raucourt might well have been pardoned if she had withdrawn a second time from the stage. That she declined to bow to the storm proves her to have possessed courage and pertinacity of an unusually high order. Indeed, her firmness on the night of Phèdre, when, at each hostile manifestation, she had slowly and deliberately repeated the line which had evoked it, had undoubtedly contributed to exasperate the baser kind of her persecutors. A little reflection, however, sufficed to assure her that, if she wished to regain the indulgence of the public, she must have

<sup>1</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, iii. 3 et seq.



recourse to other methods, and, accordingly, she addressed to the *Journal de Paris* the following letter :

“September 13, 1776.

“Unusual circumstances having placed me in the position of occupying at the Comédie a different *emploi* from the one I intended for myself, permit me, through the medium of your journal, to inform the public that I have no other ambition than to fill it to the best of my ability ; that I do not purpose playing parts of any other kind, except when it is absolutely indispensable for the service of the Comédie ; that, far from desiring to deprive my comrades of anything, my only wish is to understudy them ; too happy if, by my zeal, my exactitude, and my efforts, I succeed in convincing the public of my respect and of my anxiety to please them.

“I have the honour to be, &c.,

“DE RAUCOUR.”

This diplomatic epistle seems to have been not without its effect, and, though her reception at the Comédie-Française still left much to be desired, no attempt was made to repeat the violent scenes which had marked her two first performances. On the other hand, her creditors, urged on by her personal enemies, had again taken up arms and left her not a moment's peace. In order to avoid imprisonment, she was once more on the point of expatriating herself, when a royal edict appeared which “rendered free from all seizures, confiscations, or stoppages the wages and appointments of the players and other persons attached to the theatre, up to the amount of two-thirds, apart from the necessary expenditure for board and lodging.”

It was common belief that this edict had been

inspired by the Queen, who had seen in it an economical method of settling the debts of her favourite actress, and its appearance, while saving Mlle. Raucourt from the necessity of choosing between imprisonment and flight, exposed her to a fresh storm of invective. A score of pamphlets and leaflets, some in prose, some in verse, were launched against her, in which she and her supporters, the Duc de Duras, the Prince d'Hénin, Sophie Arnould, Madame Vestris, and Brizard, were assailed in the most violent manner. A few passages from one of these effusions, entitled *La Vision du prophète Daniel*, will convey a good idea of the methods employed against unpopular personages in the eighteenth century :

The Old Satrap [the Duc de Duras], having banished Mlle. Sainval, "to punish her for having more talents than his concubine [Madame Vestris]," announces his intention of recalling the Harlot of Babylon [Mlle. Raucourt], "whom all nations have rejected," and forcing the people whom he governs to receive her.

"And one heard a cry : 'Way, way for the Prince des Nains [the Prince d'Hénin] !'

"And I looked, expecting to behold at the head of a troop of pigmies an abortion.

"And I saw a tall, thin man, with a foolish eye and a silly smile, affecting an air of importance ; and what was my surprise to see, through his transparent body, that, in place of blood, a black and poisonous mud circulated in his veins . . . !"

"And his corrupt heart was falling into rottenness. And one saw there none of those feelings which characterise the nobility ; cowardice, poltroonery, debauchery, infamy, deceit, avarice, and duplicity, shared what remained of this gangrened heart."

“And he made his way through the crowd, leading by the hand a woman, whom I took for a man, from her impudent demeanour, her loud voice, and her gigantic stature [Mlle. Raucourt].

“She cast around her lascivious glances. . . . And a voice cried : ‘ Behold her ; the woman who has gone beyond all the abominations wherewith the nations of the earth are soiled.

“ ‘ And she is about to renew here the scenes of debauchery and extravagance which she has given elsewhere.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the following year, the *Nouvelles à la main* announce that Mlle. Raucourt has repaid the hospitality and protection received from Sophie Arnould by “an act of frightful ingratitude, unhappily but too common among women,” namely, by stealing away from her the Prince d’Hénin, “in order to rivet her fetters upon him.” The writer adds that Sophie is furious, and that the guilty pair, fearful of the consequences of their treachery, have fled to Bagatelle and taken refuge with the Comte d’Artois, who is credited with a desire to participate in the good fortune of the Prince d’Hénin.

The report that the prince had taken Mlle. Raucourt under his protection, in the technical sense of the term, was true ; but, so far from having sought refuge with the Comte d’Artois, at Bagatelle, he appears to have rented the château from its royal owner. Sophie Arnould, if she cherished any animosity against the offenders—which is open to question, the probability being that she and the prince were by this time heartily tired of one another—would have been far more likely to revenge herself by some biting *bon mot* than by personal injury.

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, xiv. 214 et seq.



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Paris and Versailles, we are told, laughed over this adventure till its sides ached, for a whole week. Mlle. Raucourt's conduct was considered despicable, but there was little pity for Sophie, who, one writer declares, was justly punished "for having welcomed a woman who was the opprobrium of her sex."

It is to be hoped that the Prince d'Hénin found in Mlle. Raucourt's society sufficient compensation for being dragged through the same gutters as the *tragédienne* by the scribes who delighted to assail her, and for the fact that it was now his privilege to deal with the horde of creditors who were "perpetually howling at her skirts." To do him justice, meanness was not one of his failings; but adversity had not taught the lady wisdom, at least so far as financial matters were concerned, and no sooner did her unfortunate lover discharge one debt than she appears to have straightway contracted another. Under date September 16, 1781, we read in the *Mémoires secrets* :

"Queen Melpomene is more than ever ruined by debt. The Prince d'Hénin, to aid her to escape the pursuits of her creditors, has taken over all the furniture and effects of this actress. But he is summoned to declare upon oath, before the Civil Lieutenant of Paris, whether his ostensible ownership is not simulated."

It would be interesting to know what course the prince adopted under these somewhat embarrassing circumstances; but, unfortunately, the chroniclers do not tell us.

In the meanwhile, Mlle. Raucourt was seeking consolation for her many troubles in the cultivation of the Muses. She was at work upon "a drama in three acts and in prose," entitled *Henriette*, adapted, it would

appear, from a play which she had seen at Warsaw, some years before. The plot was briefly as follows :

A Prussian colonel, Stelim by name, wounded in a duel, is carried to the house of Henriette's father and nursed by the lady, who falls deeply in love with her patient. The colonel recovers and returns to his duty, all unconscious of the passion which he has inspired. The lovelorn Henriette resolves to follow him, runs away from home, dressed as a man, and enlists in her colonel's regiment. One day, she surprises her beloved in the act of kissing the hand of a strange lady, upon which, unaware that the latter is only his sister, she is so overcome by jealousy and mortification that she deserts. She is pursued, recaptured, tried by court-martial, and condemned to be shot ; but, at the last moment, her secret is discovered, and all ends happily.

*Henriette* did not reach the stage of the Comédie-Française without encountering many difficulties. In the Warsaw play, Frederick the Great and his army had been treated with very scant respect ; and the Prussian Ambassador now demanded that Mlle. Raucourt's adaptation should be very strictly scrutinised, and that "all passages calculated to wound the King his master eliminated." As there seem to have been a good many of these, it was feared, at first, that the play would be mutilated beyond recognition, even if it were not prohibited altogether. But the Prince d'Hénin left no stone unturned to rescue his mistress's work from the claws of the censor, and, after many conferences and much correspondence, it was finally decided to spare those passages "in which the impertinence towards the King of Prussia was more remarkable for its intention than for its effect."

The play was produced on March 1, 1782, before a densely crowded house, which the authoress, by a very adroit manœuvre, had taken care to predispose in her favour. It was then the custom on first nights to reserve a large number of the *parterre* tickets for distribution among the author's friends, who, of course, applauded enthusiastically, no matter how coldly the production might be received by the general public. But Mlle. Raucourt refused to avail herself of this privilege, declaring that "if her drama were a good one, it would succeed on its own merits"; a decision which, we are told, was received with universal applause.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, the verdict of the public was favourable. "The first act," say the *Mémoires secrets*, "was thought cold, but the second excited long, frequent, and sincere applause. The third act was also applauded, though with less enthusiasm."

The critics were, however, anything but kind. Grimm describes the subject as "monstrous"; La Harpe stigmatises the work as "an absurd and foolish rhapsody," a striking proof of "the decadence of talents and the corruption of taste";<sup>2</sup> while the *Mercure*, after declaring that the play possesses many faults and advising Mlle. Raucourt "to treat of subjects with a truer and worthier moral end," declines to say any more. "The author is a woman, and we do not wish to play with her the part of Diomed."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, xix. 103.

<sup>2</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, iii. 327. La Harpe states that a rumour was current that Mlle. Raucourt had only lent her name to the play, and that it was really the work of either Durosoy or Monvel. This rumour, however, is indignantly repudiated by the *Mémoires secrets*, which declare it to be nothing but a malicious invention of the lady's enemies.

<sup>3</sup> *Mercure de France*, March 1782.



But whatever opinions they may have held in regard to the merits of the work itself, every one agreed that Mlle. Raucourt was charming in the uniform of a Prussian soldier ; and La Harpe states that people went two or three times solely to see her masquerading as a man.

Her success in *Henriette* encouraged Mlle. Raucourt to undertake a real masculine part, and, two years later (March 1784), she secured a genuine triumph, as a captain of dragoons, in a play by Rochon de Chabannes, called *Le Jaloux*. The ease with which she wore the uniform appears to have been particularly admired, a circumstance which is not surprising when we remember that, when in hiding, in the summer of 1776, she had worn a very similar dress for more than six weeks.

“What an *actor* that Raucourt is !” remarked the younger Sainval, who enjoyed a not undeserved reputation as a wit. “And what a pity she persists in wishing to play women’s parts !”

Little by little the hostility of which Mlle. Raucourt had so long been the object subsided. Slowly but surely the *tragédienne* recovered the ground she had lost, until, in 1786, we find the *Mémoires secrets* declaring that “she will soon take rank with the greatest actresses,” and that “the most critical amateurs were fain to confess that she had made prodigious improvement.”

This happy result seems to have been due partly to a genuine love of her art, which led her to devote far more time to serious study than had been the case in earlier years, and partly to the exercise of a good deal of tact—willingness to understudy her former rivals, to condescend to the parts of nurse and confidante, and, in short, to do almost anything that was required of her—which had disarmed the jealousy of her colleagues and

rendered her an almost popular member of the troupe. It was certainly not attributable to any change in her morals, for if scandal were no longer busy with her name, it was from no lack of material. In the years immediately preceding the Revolution, however, people had more important matters to discuss than the amours of actresses.

The Revolution very nearly proved fatal to Mlle. Raucourt. The questions which were agitating the public mind were very far from leaving the national theatre undisturbed. "Even our little green-room," writes Fleury, "was not exempt from the invasion of the moment. Melpomene and Thalia had the mortification to see their sacred altars profaned by the party pamphlets of the day, their venerated sanctuary converted into a political club." The house of Molière, in fact, was divided against itself. Mlle. Raucourt, Molé, Fleury, and Louise Contat had tasted too many of the sweets of Court favour not to deplore deeply the fall of the old régime; while, on the other hand, Talma, Madame Vestris, Dugazon, and Mlle. Deschamps espoused the popular side with the fervour of rooted conviction. Of the remainder, the majority were either Royalists or moderate constitutionalists.<sup>1</sup>

This divergence of political opinion soon led to angry recriminations and thence to an open rupture, and, in the spring of 1791, Talma and his friends, finding their position growing intolerable, withdrew from the company, to found, at the Palais-Royal, the Théâtre-Français de la Rue de Richelieu, which, in the following year, became the Théâtre de la République.

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, "The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century," 339.

Having purged itself of its Republican members, the Comédie threw itself boldly into the political strife, and, throughout the terrible winter of 1792-93, allowed no opportunity to slip of advocating the restoration of order and security. On January 3, 1793, during the King's trial, it produced a play, by Jean Laya, entitled *Les Amis des Lois*, in which Robespierre (under the name of Nomophage), Marat, and other Montagnards were held up to ridicule and odium. How such a play contrived to escape the vigilance of the Republican censors is not easy to understand, since so thinly veiled were the allusions that almost every passage was punctuated by the cheers and hooting of an excited audience. It was, of course, speedily suppressed, and from that moment the doings of the Comédie were closely watched by the sanguinary faction now rising to supremacy in the State, which only awaited an opportunity of closing the theatre and arraigning the whole company before the Revolutionary Court.

An adaptation of "Pamela," by François de Neufchâteau, afterwards Minister of the Interior, which contained not a little material calculated to awaken regret for the proscribed nobility, provided the Jacobins with the pretext they desired, and, on September 3, the whole of the players, with the exception of Molé, who had contrived to effect his escape, and Des Essarts, who was taking the waters at Baréges, were arrested and conveyed to the Madelonettes, in the Quartier Saint-Martin-des-Champs, and Sainte-Pélagie, in the Rue de la Clef; the men being assigned to the former prison and the women to the latter.

That the players, or at any rate those of them who held the most pronounced counter-revolutionary opinions, were doomed, was the opinion of even their most sanguine



friends. The Revolutionary Court, which had been created in the previous March, to judge without appeal conspirators against the State, still retained all the forms of justice—it was not until June 1794 that the hearing of counsel and calling of witnesses were dispensed with—but its proceedings were, in the great majority of cases, a hollow farce. The judges were appointed from the ranks of the most ruthless Terrorists; the jurymen, nominated by the Convention, were all “*gens d’expédition*”; while, as to give evidence on behalf of an accused person was to incur the danger of sharing his fate, witnesses for the defence could with difficulty be induced to come forward.

For some cause which is not quite certain, but was probably, as Fleury suggests, the fear of disseminating the small-pox, at that time prevailing in the Madelonnettes, the case of the imprisoned players was not dealt with for more than nine months. At length, on Messidor 8, the Committee of Public Safety deliberated upon their fate; and Collot d’Herbois sent to Fouquier-Tinville the accusatory documents against Dazincourt, Fleury, Mlles. Raucourt, Louise and Émilie Contat, and Lange, who were considered the most culpable, accompanied by the following letter:

“Herewith I send you the documents relating to the actors of the Comédie-Française. In common with all patriots, you know how counter-revolutionary their conduct has been. You will bring them before the Court on Messidor 13. With regard to the others, there are some among them who may be punished with banishment. But we will see what can be done with them after the others have been tried.”

And on the margin of each of the six *dossiers*, Collot

d'Herbois, in his own hand, had traced a capital G in red ink. For the docile Fouquier-Tinville that capital G signified : "*Guillotinez !*"

The trial was fixed for Messidor 13, and, on the following day, it was intended that Mlle. Raucourt and her five colleagues should make their final bow to the public, on the Place de la Révolution.

However, neither trial nor execution ever took place, for, on the morning of the 13th, it was found that the six *dossiers* had mysteriously disappeared, and all efforts to recover them proved fruitless.

Let us see what had become of them.

In conformity with the usual practice, the papers had been sent by Fouquier-Tinville to the Bureau des Pièces Accusatives at the dismantled Tuileries. Now, in this department there was a clerk named Charles de Labussière, who had accepted the post as a means of securing his own safety, and who at heart was a devoted Royalist. Through Labussière's hands passed all the documents relating to prisoners awaiting trial and, whenever he could do so with but little fear of discovery, he did not hesitate to destroy them. At first, he observed great caution and confined himself to abstracting a few pages from the portfolios ; but, so soon as he became aware of the reckless disorder which characterised the proceedings of the fatal committee, he enlarged the scope of his operations and is said to have saved some hundreds from the guillotine, among whom was no less a personage than Joséphine de Beauharnais, whom Fate subsequently raised to the imperial throne of France. The method he adopted was an ingenious one. As it was then summer and exceedingly hot weather, and the lighting of a fire might have attracted attention, instead of burning the

papers, it was his practice to soak them in water, until the bulky parchments had become balls of soft paste, which could be stowed away in his pockets, and to await a favourable opportunity of throwing them into the Seine.

On the night of Messidor 9, Labussière abstracted the papers relating to the imprisoned actors and carried them off. He had, however, a very narrow escape of detection. On his way to the river, his movements aroused the suspicion of a patrol, by whom he was arrested; and he would undoubtedly have been searched and the papers discovered, but for the timely arrival of an official of the Committee of Public Safety, who recognised him and ordered his release.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the players were saved, for before a new brief could be prepared, came "that happiest and most genial of revolutions, the Revolution of the 9th Thermidor," which brought the Terror to a close and freedom to so many hundreds of prisoners.

Three weeks later, the members of the Comédie-Française reappeared at their theatre in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, now called the Théâtre de l'Égalité. *La Métromanie* and *Les Fausses Confidences* composed the programme, and the players, notwithstanding the reactionary views they were known to hold, had a great reception from an immense audience, though, remarked Louise Contat sarcastically, nothing like so large a one as there would have been to see them guillotined.

The players, however, did not remain many months in their old home. The Faubourg Saint-Germain, so long the centre of rank and wealth, was being abandoned in favour of more central spots, while, as a result of the

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Fleury*, v. 228, et seq.



existing free trade in theatrical matters, there were now several playhouses within a narrow radius of the Palais-Royal, whose advantage of situation rendered them formidable competitors. In January 1795, accordingly, the members of the Comédie-Française, not, as may be supposed, without many regrets, migrated to the Théâtre Feydeau, a house which had been erected, some years before, for a company of Italian *farceurs*, and was now under the control of a speculative gentleman named Sageret.

To be the paid servant of Sageret, who does not appear to have borne the best of reputations, seemed to Mlle. Raucourt a kind of degradation—the arts and humanity, she declared, cried out against the subjection under which they had been led to place themselves; and, in the following December, that lady withdrew from the company, followed by Larive, Mlle. Joly, Saint-Prix, and several others, and took possession of a theatre in the Rue de Louvois, intending apparently to make it the central point of a reunion of the entire company.

The flower of the Comédie-Française was now divided between three playhouses: the Théâtre de la République, the Théâtre Feydeau, and the Théâtre de Louvois. Of these the latter, which was inaugurated on Nivôse 5, Year v. (December 25, 1796), with *Iphigénie* and a little play by Laya, entitled *Les Deux Sœurs*, was for a time the most successful; Mlle. Raucourt securing a great personal triumph in another masculine part—that of the hero in Legouvé's *Laurence*. *Laurence*, it may be explained, was the young gentleman who became enamoured of Ninon de Lenclos without knowing that he was her son.

The Directory, however, like the despotism which

it had succeeded, kept a jealous eye on the theatres, and was in the habit of closing them, temporarily or altogether, upon the slightest provocation; and an incident which took place during the performance of *Les Trois Frères rivaux* ruined all the hopes of Mlle. Raucourt. One of the characters, addressing his *valet-de-chambre*, by name Merlin, exclaims :

“ Monsieur Merlin, you are a scoundrel ! Monsieur Merlin, you will end by being hanged ! ”

Now Merlin de Douai, the Minister of Justice, was just then in very bad odour with the public; and the audience applied the speech to him and cheered vociferously for several minutes.

A few days later (September 9, 1797), at the moment when the curtain was about to rise on a performance of the *Barbier de Seville*, an order arrived forbidding all further representations at the Théâtre de Louvois.

Mlle. Raucourt made every effort to obtain a revocation of the order, but to no purpose. However, she was not long without a theatre, as, at the beginning of the following year, she contrived to secure possession of the former seat of the Comédie-Française, in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, henceforth to be known as the Odéon, which she opened with a performance of *Phèdre*. Shortly afterwards, the Théâtre de la République shared the fate of the Théâtre de Louvois, the political opinions of Talma and his associates being too advanced to please the Government. The enterprising Sageret thereupon induced the homeless players to join forces with their former colleagues at the Théâtre Feydeau, and took over the management of the Odéon from Mlle. Raucourt, his intention being that the actors under his command should appear at either theatre in turn. But Sageret

became bankrupt and disappeared; the Odéon was completely destroyed by a fire, the cause of which was never discovered, and Paris found itself without a temple of the legitimate drama.

This unfortunate condition of affairs, however, lasted but a short while. François de Neufchâteau, the author of the *Paméla* which had proved so fatal, was now Minister of the Interior and honestly desirous of doing everything in his power to promote the interests of the drama. Through his influence, in May 1799, a wise measure of the Consular Government reunited in a single society the scattered members of the old Comédie-Française, and placed at its disposal the *salle* of the Palais-Royal (formerly the Théâtre de la République), which it has not ceased to occupy to this day.

Mlle. Raucourt, to her honour be it said, never made any secret of her monarchical sympathies. During the Directory, she was a bright and shining light of what was known as "*Le petit Coblentz*," an association of Royalists which held its meetings at a house in the Boulevard des Italiens and strove, by force of jests, sarcasms, and epigrams, to upset the Republic. She wore on her spencer eighteen buttons, "a delicate allusion to Louis XVIII., the legitimate sovereign." And when she fanned herself, it was with one of those famous weeping-willow fans, the folds of which formed the face of Marie Antoinette.

Nevertheless, Mlle. Raucourt had, personally, but little cause to complain of the Directory. Her antagonism to the Government did not extend to its agents, through the good offices of some of whom she contrived to make a considerable fortune, by judicious speculation in



assignats, army contracts, and confiscated estates. She now discharged her debts, and bought "a palace" in the Rue Royale, with a spacious garden attached, where she gave sumptuous fêtes, to which all fashionable Paris was invited. Nothing so delightful as her boudoir, we are assured, had ever been seen before; the fittings were of green and gold, and the chimney-piece of blue marble.

After the establishment of the Empire, Napoleon, who was a great admirer of Mlle. Raucourt's acting, accorded her a handsome pension and engaged her to organise a troupe of French players, to travel through Italy and give performances in the principal towns, with the idea of extending French influence in that country. In Italy, Mlle. Raucourt remained several years, paying, however, occasional visits to Paris, when she appeared at the Comédie-Française, generally in the parts of mothers or queens, and always with great success. Madame Vigée Lebrun tells us that she remained to the last a great *tragédienne*, but that, with advancing years, her voice became so harsh that, when not looking at her, people might have imagined themselves listening to a man.<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Raucourt retired from the stage in 1814, her farewell appearance at the Comédie-Française being as Catherine de Medicis, in the *États de Blois* of Raynouard. On January 15 of the following year, she died, after a short illness, "thanking God that she had been permitted to salute the return of her legitimate King."

The funeral, which took place two days later, was the occasion of a painful scandal. From the earliest days of the Restoration, the clergy, relying on the support of the new Government, had shown themselves as in-

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs*, i. 82.

tolerant towards the actor as had those of the old régime. Mlle. Raucourt's house was in the Rue du Helder, that is to say, in the parish of Saint-Roch, and it was in that church that the service should have been held. The curé, however, flatly refused to celebrate it. "Actors," said he, "are excommunicated, and the time has come to revert to the rigorous execution of the canons of the Church." It was in vain that he was reminded of the never-failing charity of the deceased woman towards the poor of his parish, and the generous gift which he himself had received each year for the needs of his church. He remained deaf to all representations and entrenched himself behind the orders of the Archbishop of Paris.

To obtain justice, the members of the Comédie-Française addressed a petition to the King, but the morning of the interment came without bringing an answer from his Majesty. In the meanwhile, the news of the refusal of the curé of Saint-Roch to accord ecclesiastical burial to the remains of the great actress had become common knowledge and had aroused widespread indignation. An enormous crowd, numbering fully 15,000 persons, assembled in the Rue du Helder and the adjoining streets, among which might be observed several actors of the Comédie in the uniform of the National Guards. At the moment when the cortège left the house, the police gave the order to proceed directly to the cemetery; but the crowd interfered and compelled the hearse to drive towards Saint-Roch. On entering the Rue de la Michodière, a police-officer rushed to the horses' heads, to turn them in the direction of the boulevard, but was roughly pushed aside; and the procession, growing in size every moment, pursued its way towards Saint-Roch.

When the church was reached, the principal door was found closed, a circumstance which threw the mob into a frenzy of anger. Some proposed to break down the door, others to carry the corpse to the Tuileries or the archbishop's palace; while cries of "*Le curé à la lanterne!*" were raised, and if that intolerant ecclesiastic had had the temerity to show himself, it is to be feared that he would have been very roughly handled.

The actors in the procession, alarmed at all this uproar, the blame for which, they feared, would be laid upon them, took advantage of a moment when the more violent section of the crowd was occupied in endeavouring to force the great door of the church, to make the cortège resume its progress towards Père-Lachaise. The mob, however, gave chase, overtook the hearse at the top of the Rue Traversière, and brought it back in triumph to Saint-Roch.

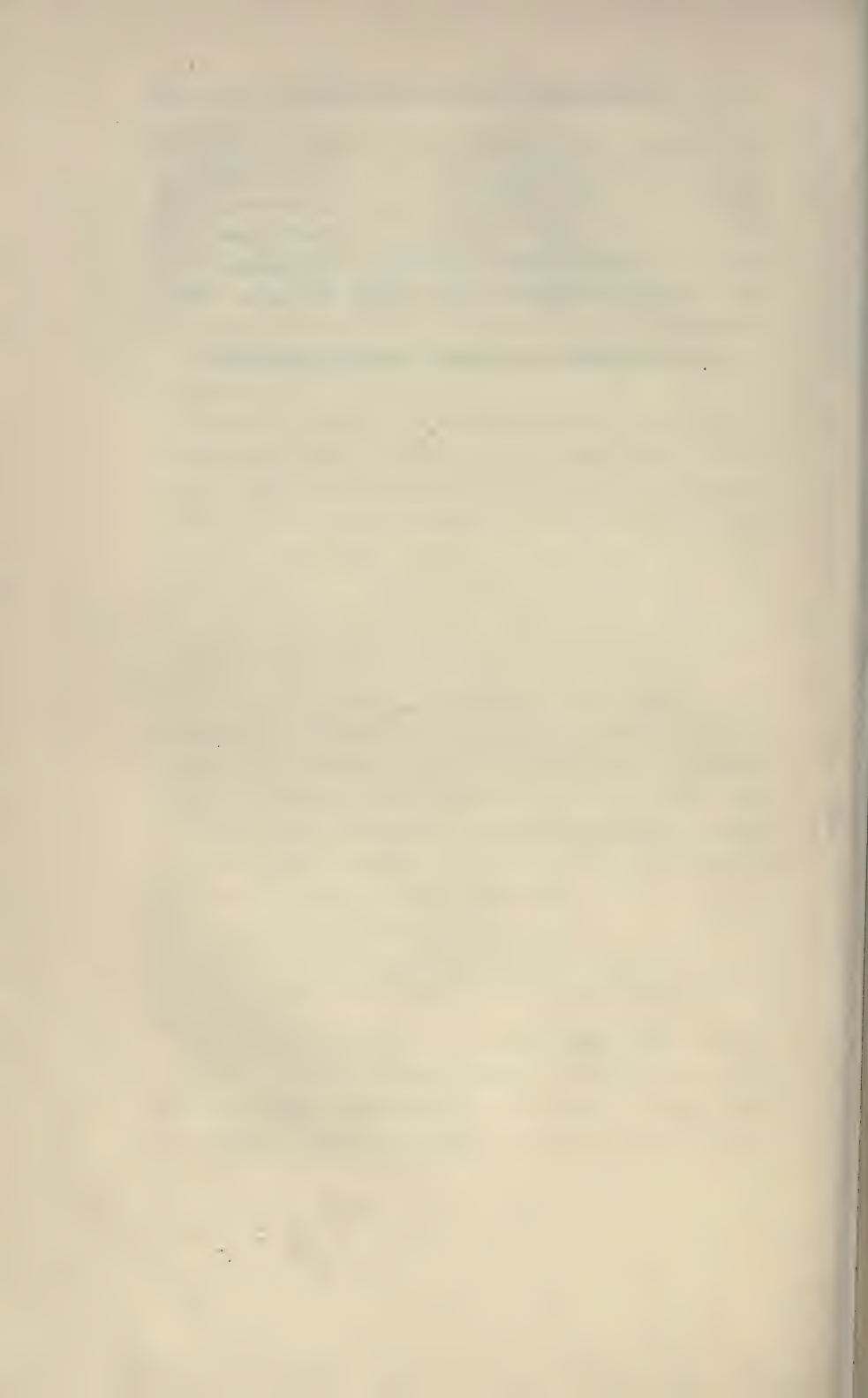
In the meanwhile, a deputation had started for the Tuileries; Louis XVIII. consented to admit it to his presence, and Huet, an actor of the Opéra-Comique, harangued the monarch with so much eloquence, that, some days later, he received an intimation that a course of foreign travel might not be without benefit to his health. However, his representations had the desired effect; for the King promised to interfere without delay, sent orders to the curé to receive the body, and, for greater security, despatched his own almoner to read the service.

The orders of the King arrived only just in time to prevent a serious affray between the infuriated mob and the troops who had been summoned to quell the disturbance. The great door was then opened, and the



coffin, borne on the shoulders of the crowd, was carried to the foot of the altar, where the people themselves lighted the candles. The almoner of the Court arrived, accompanied by two choristers, and performed the service, at the conclusion of which an immense concourse of people followed the cortège as far as Père-Lachaise.<sup>1</sup>

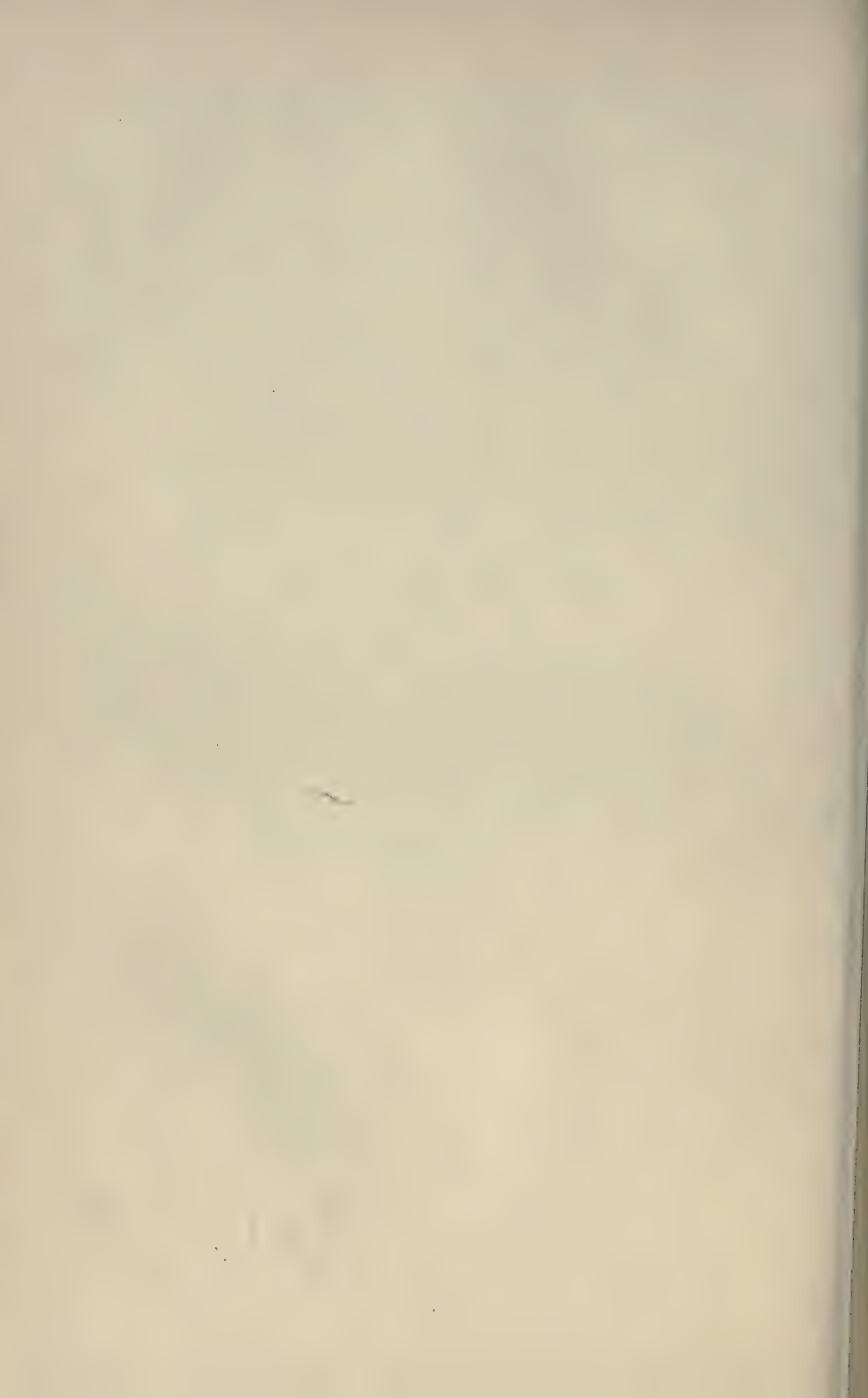
<sup>1</sup> M. Gaston Maugras, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, p. 460 et seq.



IV

MADAME DUGAZON





#### IV

### MADAME DUGAZON

WHEN, at the close of the year 1774, Justine Favart retired from the stage of the Comédie-Italienne, to die alas! a few months later, she left behind her, in the person of a young girl of nineteen, a worthy successor, whose budding talents she had been one of the first to recognise and encourage.

Louise Rosalie Lefèvre, known to fame as Madame Dugazon, was born, at Berlin, on June 18, 1755, of French parents. Her father, François Joseph Lefèvre, was a dancing-master, formerly of the Comédie-Italienne, and when, in 1767, the little Louise, who had been from a very early age destined for the stage, made her first appearance on the boards of that theatre, it was as a *danseuse* in a *pas de deux* introduced into the *Nouvelle École des femmes*, a comedy in three acts and in prose, by Moissy.

It was not, however, as a *danseuse* that Louise Lefèvre was to attain her immense reputation. Ere long her grace, refinement, and command of facial expression attracted the attention of the composer Grétry, who after some conversation with her, promised her a part in his next opera. He was as good as his word, and when, in 1769, he produced his *Lucile*, it was for the little Lefèvre that he composed the pretty air :

“ On dit qu'à quinze ans.”

The grace, charm, and *naïveté* with which she rendered

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it decided her future. Pleased at finding his previsions confirmed, the composer advised her to devote herself seriously to the study of music, promising that he would bear her in mind; and from that day the girl "divided her time between dancing, which was her duty, and the study of music, which was her passion."<sup>1</sup>

She was fortunate in her teachers, particularly in Madame Favart, who, with a magnanimity far from common on the stage, did all in her power to aid and encourage the young aspirant. The lessons were not thrown away, nor was the pupil wanting in gratitude; for even in her old age, when she had retired from the theatre, Madame Dugazon could not mention the name of Justine Favart without tears in her eyes.

At length, on June 19, 1774, Mlle. Lefèvre was promoted to a definite part, that of Pauline, in *Sylvain*, words by Marmontel, music by Grétry. Her success was instantaneous, unprecedented. At a single bound, she attained the highest rank, an elevation from which she never afterwards descended. Never in the history of the Comédie-Italienne had such talent been exhibited by so young an actress, and never had talent been so keenly appreciated by its patrons. It sufficed for her to undertake the principal part in any new work to ensure for it a favourable, if not a triumphant, reception. *Les Événements imprévus*, *l'Amant jaloux*, *Les Amours d'été*, and many other pieces owed the vogue which they enjoyed entirely to her masterly impersonations.

Four days after her appearance in *Sylvain*, Mlle. Lefèvre was received *à l'essai*, with a salary of 1800 livres, which, in the following April, was increased to 2400 livres. But promotion was slow in those days,

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 151.



even for the most brilliant talents, and it was not until April 7, 1776, that she became a *sociétaire*.<sup>1</sup>

But long before this—almost, indeed, from the evening on which she had first played Pauline—the public had taken her to its heart. People seemed never tired of lauding “her sympathetic voice, her exquisite sensibility, her gaiety, which was so contagious, her acting, which was so tender and impassioned.” Some enthusiasts even went so far as to declare that such remarkable talent must be the product of some divine inspiration.

Mlle. Lefèvre was not strictly beautiful, but “adorably pretty,” dainty, and refined. She had delicate features, a mobile face, “and an expressive mouth, sometimes mocking, sometimes pouting.” But her greatest charm seems to have been her splendid eyes, fringed with long lashes, which, in turn, “shone with mischief and gaiety, or closed in order to allow the soft tears to flow.” Her figure, we are told, “without being tall, was well-proportioned, and all her movements were characterised by a peculiar charm.”

Naturally, she was speedily surrounded by a throng of adorers. No actress of the time was so sought after, courted, adulated. “Jupiters of all conditions solicited the honour of descending at her feet in a shower of gold.” The most brilliant propositions were made to her: furnished hôtels, gorgeous equipages, ravishing toilettes, parures of diamonds, together with the hearts, if not the hands, of the noblest in the land, were at her disposal. She repulsed them all; she had decided to marry—to marry in her own profession. And her choice fell upon Dugazon, of the Comédie-Française.

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *Les Comédiens du Roi de la Troupe italienne*: Article, “Dugazon.”

A singular character was this Dugazon. Born at Marseilles, in 1749, he made his first appearance on the Paris stage in 1771, and at once succeeded in ingratiating himself with his audience. Handsome and well made, he united to a profound knowledge of his art and a wealth of humour, a physiognomy of extraordinary flexibility, which he could so change at any moment that it seemed as if he had put on a mask. "By the play or the contraction of certain muscles of his face, he possessed the faculty of disfiguring himself instantly and so completely as to become unrecognisable." There can be no question that he was a great comedian, though his style was in the spirit of farce rather than of comedy, and by the side of Prévile, who, with all his vivacity, never condescended to what was low or trivial, he must have appeared a mere caricaturist. But in broad comedy he was unsurpassed, and in the farces of Scarron and Le Grand, as Scapin in the *Fourberies*, Monsieur Jourdain in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Mascarille in *l'Étourdi*, and Sganerelle in *Don Juan*, no actor of the time could even approach him.

But if the actor was excellent, the man was altogether insupportable. In the café or the tavern, a quarrelsome braggart, as ready with his sword as with his tongue. In the salon—for, in his character of privileged buffoon, he was admitted into the highest circles—a rude jester, who respected neither age nor sex, and who took the most outrageous liberties with every one who did not make him keep his distance. Many are the stories told of his eccentricities, one at least of which will bear repetition here.

One day the actor received a summons to Versailles, from Louis XVI. himself. Wondering much what his

sovereign could require of him, he repaired thither, and, on his arrival, was ushered into the King's cabinet, where he found his Majesty alone. The King bade him be seated, and then informed him that he required his assistance in a matter closely concerning the dignity of the Royal Family. He was, said he, extremely displeased at her Majesty continuing to attend the balls at the Opera, in the face of his oft-expressed disapproval of these gatherings. He had therefore bethought him of a means of curing her of this deplorable weakness for mixed society. Dugazon must attend the next ball, in disguise, treat the august lady as if she were nothing but a common *bourgeoise*, and so shock and disgust her that she would never care to attend another.

Dugazon obeyed with alacrity; the commission entrusted to him was one after his own heart. At the next ball he appeared disguised as a fishwife, a veritable virago of the Halles, foul of tongue, unkempt and dirty, and, taking the Queen aside, behaved to her—it was the King's express command, be it remembered—with such outrageous coarseness and familiarity that the spectators were absolutely horrified.

Next morning, the King slyly inquired how her Majesty had enjoyed herself the previous evening.

“Never,” answered Marie Antoinette, laughing heartily, “never was I so much diverted as yesterday!”

The marriage between Louise Lefèvre and Dugazon was celebrated at Saint-Eustache on August 20, 1776. It was not a happy one. The husband was bad-tempered, exacting, and jealous; the wife pleasure-loving, coquetish and self-willed. Before the honeymoon was well over, they were quarrelling like cat and dog. Before a



year had passed, their domestic differences were the talk of Paris. Madame's marriage vows weighed very lightly upon her, and she made but small attempt to disguise her amours; Monsieur went about, complaining to every one whom he could persuade to listen to him of his wife's conduct, and boasting of the terrible retribution he intended for her lovers.

In 1778, there was a grave scandal. A certain M. de Cazes, a young *maître des requêtes*, fell madly in love with Madame Dugazon, who condescended to reciprocate his passion. In order to conceal their intrigue and, at the same time, facilitate their interviews, M. de Cazes presented the Dugazons to his father, a wealthy farmer-general, who invited them to his house, where actor and magistrate often performed scenes from popular comedies for the entertainment of the company. Their most diverting performance, however, took place in private, a fact to be regretted, since it must have been worth going a very long way to see.

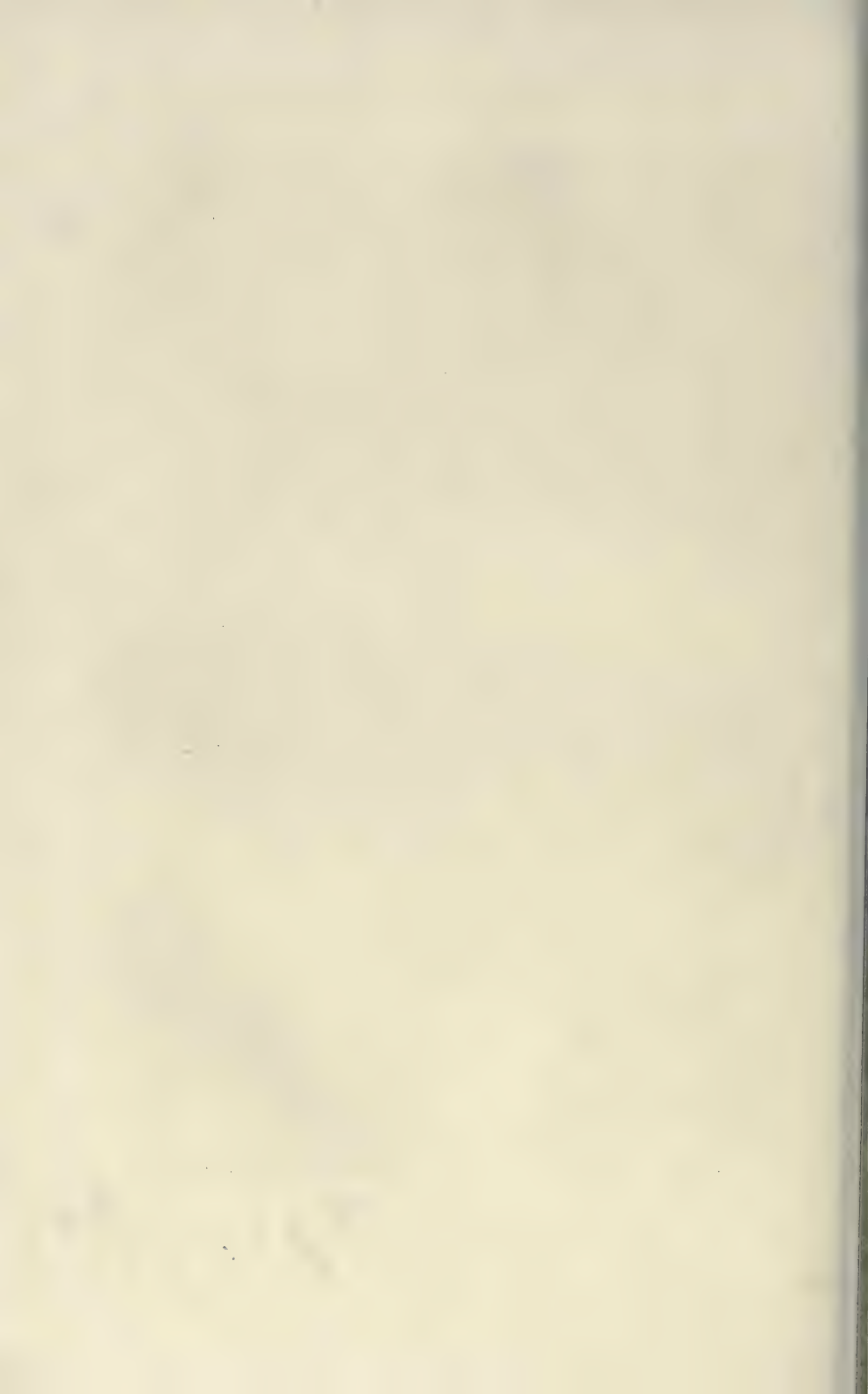
Dugazon had for some time suspected the motive of his introduction to this family and the very cordial reception which had been accorded him. But the guilty pair had observed so much discretion that he had not a particle of evidence to justify his interference and was, therefore, at a loss how to proceed. Jealousy, however, prompted him to a bold move. One morning, M. de Cazes was in his cabinet, dreaming of his inamorata, when Dugazon entered unannounced, and, locking the door behind him, drew a pistol from his pocket, held it to the young man's head, informed him that he knew everything, and that he would blow out his brains on the instant, if he did not immediately deliver up his wife's portrait and letters.



M<sup>me</sup> Dugazon

MADAME DUGAZON

From an engraving by MONSALDI after the painting by JEAN BAPTISTE ISABEY





The unfortunate gallant believed that Madame Dugazon had made a confession to her husband or that in some way he had been betrayed, and, in fear and trembling, handed over both portrait and letters to his assailant, who retired, enchanted with the success of his expedition.

No sooner, however, had the actor and his pistol departed, than M. de Cazes's alarm gave way to indignation, and he followed in pursuit, shouting: "Thief! Assassin! Stop the villain!" And the servants, roused by his cries, came running to the spot.

Dugazon, who was leisurely descending the stairs, turned round, and, in no way disconcerted, coolly replied: "Perfect, Monsieur; admirably played! The scene is excellent! The servants would be quite deceived by it, were they not accustomed to our farces." Then, without quickening his pace, he passed through the astonished lackeys—who, uncertain whether it was a comedy or not, did not dare to lay hands on him—gained the door, made the discomfited magistrate a profound *congé*, and swaggered off.

Some days later, M. de Cazes happened to be on the stage of the Comédie-Italienne, at the conclusion of the performance, and was there espied by Dugazon, who could not resist the temptation to read his wife's admirer a second lesson. Accordingly, he waited until the crowd had dispersed and he was unobserved, and then, stealing up behind the *maître des requêtes*, dealt him four or five sharp cuts across the shoulders with a cane.

The luckless young man turned round, furious with rage and pain, and, perceiving his "rival," poured forth a torrent of abuse and threats.

The actor, quite unmoved, begged him to explain

himself and inquired, with a bland smile, if he were rehearsing a tirade from some play.

The infuriated magistrate rejoined by calling Dugazon "an assassin," and asserting that he had just dealt him several blows with a cane.

The latter assumed an air of injured innocence, assured M. de Cazes that he must be labouring under some extraordinary delusion, and inquired how he could possibly imagine that a poor player like himself should have been guilty of so shocking an outrage.

As there were no witnesses to the assault, and M. de Cazes had no mind to give the actor, who was an expert swordsman, the satisfaction of running him through the body, the affair went no further. Dugazon, however, did not fail to boast everywhere he went of the thrashing he had inflicted on madame's lover ; conduct which, the *Mémoires secrets* tell us, "revolted honourable men."

If Dugazon had taken upon himself to detect and punish all his wife's infidelities, it is to be feared that he would have had but little time to devote to his professional duties. "The singing-bird had taken flight and returned but seldom to the conjugal nest." However, for a time, he did his best, and, in the course of the following year, had an affray at the house of Sallé, the director of the winter Vauxhall, with the Marquis de Langeac, who had succeeded M. de Cazes in the actress's affections.

Dugazon had written an angry letter to his wife, reminding the lady of her numerous escapades and bitterly reproaching her with having accepted the homage of M. de Langeac, to whom he alluded in terms of the most unmitigated contempt. This letter Madame Dugazon promptly handed to the marquis, who, talking the

matter over with his friend Sallé, announced his intention of subjecting the actor to "a hundred blows with his cane," on the very next occasion on which they should chance to meet. Scarcely were the words out of his mouth, when the object of his resentment, who had been an unseen auditor of all that he had said, stood before him, and, with a profound bow, intimated that he was entirely at Monsieur le Marquis's service.

The marquis replied with a blow from his fist; the actor returned the compliment with interest, and an Homeric combat was in progress, when the bystanders interfered and separated the parties.

This adventure had no more consequences than the other. Dugazon, who, to do him justice, was no coward, would have been only too ready to continue the battle in the manner prescribed by the etiquette of that day. But M. de Langeac, a notorious poltroon—he had, some time before, taken, without any attempt at retaliation, a severe thrashing from Guérin, the Prince de Conti's surgeon—sheltered himself behind his rank and declined to cross swords with an actor.

His affray with the Marquis de Langeac appears to have been the last occasion on which Dugazon attempted to avenge his honour. He resigned himself to the situation; and when, soon afterwards, the "singing-bird" flew away altogether and established herself in a gilded cage prepared for her by a rich financier of the name of Boudreau, received the news with fashionable complacency. From that time, husband and wife never lived together again, and, when the Revolution came, both hastened to avail themselves of the law permitting divorce.

Madame Dugazon had barely remained long enough



in the gilded cage to take stock of all the marvels of art and decoration which the amorous financier had provided for her benefit, when she fell in love with a foreign count, whose name the chroniclers of scandal, with a discretion very uncommon with them, forbear to mention, and left poor M. Boudreau to meditate upon the inconstancy of woman. This last affair would appear to have been a serious one, on the lady's part, at any rate ; but it was of very brief duration, as the count was suddenly recalled to his own country, and she saw him no more.

Consolation, however, was not long in forthcoming. Her lover's departure happened to synchronise with the arrival from Bordeaux of a handsome youth of eighteen, "with the most interesting face conceivable, and the most surprising, the most wonderful voice possible to imagine." Without knowing a single note of music, he could imitate the voice of every singer of the Opera and the sound of every instrument in the orchestra, so perfectly as to deceive even the most experienced ear. By himself, it was said, he could imitate an entire opera. This prodigy, Garat by name, aroused a perfect *furor* in fashionable, as well as in musical circles, and after Marie Antoinette had sent a coach and six to fetch him to Versailles, the enthusiasm of the ladies was raised to the highest pitch ; they literally fought for him. Madame Dugazon bore away the prize, and is believed to have given the youthful singer lessons in his art as well as in love. But she could not long retain possession of "this brilliant butterfly, who had only to open his wings to alight upon the most beautiful flowers," and, for the first time in her life, was fated to taste something of the mortification which she had so often occasioned.

From these discreditable gallantries, it is a relief to turn to Madame Dugazon's professional career, which, happily, seems to have been no more affected by the irregularities of her private life than those of Mlle. Clairon and Madeleine Guimard. The enthusiasm with which even the most fastidious of her contemporaries acclaim her talent is truly remarkable. "I have often," writes Bouilly, "admired Madame Saint-Huberty, at the Opera, in lyric tragedy, Mlle. Raucourt in the master-pieces of our French stage, and the brilliant Mlle. Contat in comedy; but not one of these celebrated women united, in my opinion, that variety of perfections, that incomprehensible medley of pathos and gaiety, of nobleness and simplicity, of finesse and naturalness, which made Madame Dugazon admired in the different rôles wherein, in turn, she showed herself princess and peasant, soubrette and tender mother, *ingénue* and coquette, wealthy woman and poor one. She seized with an admirable fidelity upon all the shades of Nature, all the movements of the human heart, all the inspirations of the most eager imagination. . . . One was, in turn, moved, ravished, transported; from tears the most abundant one passed to laughter the most irrepressible, from terror to gaiety the most natural and the most infectious; one passed, in a word, through all the windings of the human heart; one experienced all the sensations which leave a perfect remembrance. And this was the work of one woman, whose admirable intelligence did not cease to be the interpreter of Nature, whose talent, flexible and always natural, was cited by authors and friends of the art as the most perfect model possessed by our lyric stage."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mes Récapitulations*, i. 124.

And Madame Vigée Lebrun says :

“And now I come to her whose dramatic career I have followed from beginning to end, to the most perfect actress ever possessed by the Opéra-Comique, to Madame Dugazon. Hers was a natural talent, which owed nothing apparently to study. Noble, naïve, graceful, piquant, she had twenty faces, and always suited her accent to the person she represented at the time. Her voice was somewhat weak, but she adapted it equally well to tears, laughter, and every situation.”<sup>1</sup>

That Madame Dugazon was far greater as an actress than as a vocalist there can, we think, be no question. The father of French *opéra-comique*, Grétry, gives it as his opinion that she was not a singer at all, but “an actress who *spoke song* with the truest and most passionate expression.” And Boïeldieu, the author of *La Dame Blanche*, says much the same. “What an astonishing woman!” he exclaimed, after the first performance of *Le Calife de Bagdad*. “They say that she does not understand music ; yet I never heard any one sing with such taste and expression, such nature and fidelity.”<sup>2</sup>

Madame Dugazon’s voice indeed, though limited in range, was pure and flexible and of an enchanting tone, and, as was the case with Garat, her natural endowments far outweighed the disadvantages of a deficient musical education.

To recall all the successes of this charming actress, it would be necessary, as M. Campardon very truly remarks, to cite practically the whole répertoire of the Comédie-Italienne, and we will, therefore, confine ourselves to those of her “creations” upon which contemporary writers have left us the fullest information.

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs*, i. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Thurner, *Les Reines de Chant*, p. 66.



An opera called *Blaise et Babet*, libretto by Monvel, music by Desaiides, produced on June 30, 1783, marks the commencement of the most brilliant period of her career. This little work provided Madame Dugazon with a magnificent triumph. "What fine and delicate shades," writes Grimm, "does the voice of Madame Dugazon impart, in this rôle of Babet, to the most simple expressions! There is not one of her inflections, there is not a movement in her acting, which does not add to the movement of the scene, and does not vary it with as much truth as grace."<sup>1</sup> And the critic of the *Mercur*e writes: "It is difficult to describe all the shades of talent that Madame Dugazon has developed in the rôle of Babet. Natural, comical, naïve, intelligent, sensible, she has not allowed one of the traits which make up the character of the person whom she represents to escape."

The third performance of *Blaise et Babet* was graced by the presence of the Queen, who was so enchanted with the part played by Madame Dugazon that she forthwith resolved to act it herself, and soon afterwards the piece was presented at the royal theatre at Trianon, with Marie Antoinette as Babet. Madame Dugazon and Fleury were summoned to Court to preside over the rehearsals and aid the Queen with their counsels. Nor were their pains thrown away, for, if we are to believe the Fleury *Mémoires*, her Majesty's rendering of Babet almost equalled that of the actress herself:

"She was a thousand times to be applauded, when she was vexed, crushed her flowers, threw them into the basket, and exclaimed, with the most charming toss of her head: '*Tu m'as fait endêver . . . endêve . . . endêve !*'"

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, xi. 417.

"It was such a delightful medley of pouting and sentiment, of tears and vexation, of anger and love, that I saw proud courtiers moved by it, and, courtiers though they were, forget to applaud, because they were weeping."

The comedy entitled *Alexis et Justine*, by the same authors, produced on January 17, 1785, was for Madame Dugazon, who played the part of Justine, the occasion of another triumph, which Grimm records in these terms :

"Madame Dugazon has just developed a new kind of talent in the rôle of Justine. It was difficult to unite to this degree the most lively and the most passionate sensibility with a *naïveté* the most sweet and the most attractive. This charming actress has been truly eloquent in the scene of the second act with M. de Longpré. Our best *tragédiennes* could not render with more energy and with variations more just and more profound all the sentiment of this part, one of the most pathetic that has ever been seen on the stage."<sup>1</sup>

In November of the same year, was produced *La Dot*, a comedy in three acts by Desfontaines, music by Dalayrac, in which Madame Dugazon gave so charming a rendering of the part of the heroine Colette, that a poet, who elected to remain anonymous, but who, M. Campardon thinks, was, in all probability, the author of the piece himself, thanked her in the following verses for the pleasure she had given him :

"Dis moi donc par quelle magie,  
Ne changeant au plus que de nom,

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<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, xii. 261. At the conclusion of the piece on the first evening, Madame Dugazon was called before the curtain, "an honour," say the *Mémoires secrets*, "which had never yet been accorded to any actress at this theatre or any other."

Tu fais, à la voix de Thalie,  
Changer de maintien et de ton ?  
Babet m'avoit semblé parfaite,  
Je l'admirerois à chaque trait,  
Et depuis que j'ai vu Colette,  
Je songe un peu moins à Babet.  
Plus naturelle et plus sublime,  
Par un mot, un geste, un soupir,  
Tout à la fois Colette exprime  
Le sentiment et le plaisir.  
Partout c'est la vérité pure,  
Que Colette prends sur le fait,  
Et pour dot la simple nature  
Lui fit présent de son secret."<sup>1</sup>

Madame Dugazon now found herself at the apogee of her talent, and it appeared hardly possible that she could soar any higher, when, in May 1786, her creation of the part of Nina, in *Nina, ou la Folle par amour*, a drama in one act, by Marsollier de Vivetières, music by Dalayrac, exhibited her in a new light and excited among the Parisians an enthusiasm almost unprecedented.

The genesis of this piece is interesting. It was suggested to Marsollier by a touching anecdote of a young girl who had lived in the neighbourhood of Sedan. On her wedding morning, the maiden had preceded her lover to the church where the ceremony was to be performed. On nearing it, she was met by a friend, who informed her that the young man had been seized with a sudden attack of illness and was dead. The grief of the unhappy girl was such that she lost her reason. Thenceforth, until her own death, ten years later, she walked daily more than two leagues to the spot where

<sup>1</sup> Campardon, *Les Comédiens du Roi de la Troupe italienne* : Article, 'Dugazon.'



she had arranged to meet her lover, and, on arriving there, would sit down and wait for him the entire day. At length, when the shades of evening were falling, she would rise and retrace her steps, exclaiming: "Let us go. He has not yet arrived; I will return to-morrow."

When he had completed the libretto, Marsollier sent it to Dalayrac, who, quick to recognise the splendid possibilities it offered for musical effect, gladly promised his co-operation. The score was soon written, but, for some little time, the authors hesitated to submit it to the Comédie-Italienne, fearing that their attempt to depict madness on the stage was too hazardous, and might expose them to the risk of a disastrous failure.

While they were still in doubt, Mlle. Guimard offered them the use of her private theatre, in the Chaussée-d'Antin, for an experimental performance. They gratefully accepted, and it was on the erotic stage of the Temple of Terpsichore, "on those boards whereon the *coryphées* of the *fricassée* had so many times bounded," that Madame Dugazon created the part of Nina, before the usual mixed audience of noblemen, *grandes dames*, and courtesans. The result was a prodigious, an astonishing success, and, on May 15, 1786, the curtain of the Comédie-Italienne rose on *Nina, ou la Folle par amour*.

The creation of Nina dominates Madame Dugazon's whole career and eclipses all her earlier triumphs. Never within the memory of man, says M. Campardon, had there been a like success. The actress threw into the part her whole soul, and it was very often remarked that on the days on which she had been playing Nina, she retained throughout the remainder of the evening the haggard eyes and singular gestures of the unhappy mad woman whom she had just been impersonating. "She played

the part," writes Bouilly, "with a perfection impossible to describe; one must have seen and heard her to form a correct idea of that penetrating voice, of that frenzy, heartrending and yet full of charm, of that energy of expression [which thrilled every heart."<sup>1</sup> Grimm pronounces her in this piece superior to herself and to all the actresses that are the most applauded at the other theatres. "Never," says he, "was there displayed a sensibility more exquisite and more profound. Never did any one know how to assume more happily the most diverse tones. Never did any one vary them with more correctness. It is the sensibility of her acting that decided essentially the success of the work, for the tears which she has caused to flow do not prevent one from perceiving that it leaves much to desire."<sup>2</sup>

But whatever the shortcomings of *Nina* may have been, the public seemed resolved to ignore them, and the enthusiasm with which the work and its "inspired interpreter" were received passed all bounds. "When one beheld her, her hair unbound, her eyes staring, a bouquet in her hand, advance towards the grassy bank near which she awaits her '*bien-aimé*,' when the plaints of the poor distracted girl were translated by the naïve and tender music of Dalayrac, it seemed as if emotion had reached its limits. One wept for *Nina*, as one wept for *Garat*, *Miss Billington*, *Todi*, *Maillard*, or *Saint-Huberty*."<sup>3</sup>

The tears, the applause, baffled all description. Six times at the conclusion of the play was the "sublime lunatic" recalled. The public could not applaud

<sup>1</sup> *Mes Récapitulations*, i. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, xiii. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Thurner, *Les Reines du Chant*, p. 65.

enough, and at each performance the enthusiasm increased; it seemed inexhaustible. Every evening the doors of the theatre were besieged by an enormous crowd. "Men went thither to be moved by the sorrows which were able to cause such abandon, women to seek emotions and the secret of tears." Not an evening passed without some lady in the audience swooning with emotion.

Madness became on a sudden the fashionable disease. In the salons a host of young women found occupation in playing the part of Nina, and some of them appeared to have worked themselves into a condition bordering on lunacy. The critics essayed in vain to combat this ridiculous infatuation. They pronounced the subject monstrous, the libretto insipid, the music detestable, and loudly bewailed the decay of art upon the stage. They might have saved their paper and ink. The public continued to applaud and to weep, and the receipts of the Comédie-Italienne to increase. "It seemed," remarks one of the lady's biographers, "that each spectator was of the opinion of an enthusiast who, on the evening of the first representation, improvised the following verses in honour of Nina-Dugazon :

" ' Tous les cœurs sont émus à tes divins accords,  
On ne sait qu'admirer, ton génie ou tes charmes.  
Tu pleures, aussitôt tu fais couler mes larmes :  
Qui donc resterait froid à tes brûlants transports ?  
Mais la toile se baisse et la pièce est finie,  
Aussitôt cesse ta folie,  
Mais moi, d'amour pour toi perdre la raison.' " <sup>1</sup>

The provinces, in their turn, desired to witness this wonderful work and to applaud the idolised actress; and Madame Dugazon, accordingly, paid a visit to Lyons,

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 163.



where a magnificent reception awaited her. Such was the enthusiasm she evoked that her admirers would have liked to raise a triumphal arch in her honour, but, as the city authorities did not quite see their way to gratify this desire, they were fain to content themselves with composing verses in her praise, which were read upon the stage, crowning her with flowers, and applauding until the rafters rang.

On her return to Paris, Madame Dugazon found herself, if it were possible, more the rage than ever, and so completely did her popularity eclipse that of her rivals, that, on the evenings on which she did not appear, the directors of the Comédie-Italienne—that nursery of pretty women—had the mortification to see the boxes empty and their theatre a desert. Their consternation, therefore, may be imagined when, towards the end of that year, the lady, without a moment's warning, set out for London.

It was at first believed that she had been enticed away by magnificent offers from London managers, but it subsequently transpired that love and not money had drawn her to England; that she had gone thither in the company of a young man with whom she had fallen desperately in love, whether an Englishman or one of her own countrymen contemporary chroniclers do not tell us.

The directors were in despair and wrote letter upon letter, commanding—for she had departed without obtaining the necessary *congé*—requesting, finally imploring her to return. But the actress replied that she was very content where she was and that they might dispose of her rôles. In vain they attempted to replace her. In vain the beautiful Madame Pitrot, the pretty

Lescot, and the charming Colombe tried their fascinations upon the audience. The public would have none of them; scarcely could they obtain a single plaudit. And night after night the curtain rose upon empty benches.

At length, Madame Dugazon, wearying of London or of love—or of both—condescended to return, and, with her, came Fortune once more to the Comédie-Italienne. The empty boxes, the deserted *parterre*, filled as if by magic, the theatre once more rang with applause, and the directors, who had lately seen ruin staring them in the face, were all smiles and good-humour as they complacently regarded their swelling coffers.

Advancing years brought no decline in the popularity of Madame Dugazon. Unlike the great majority of actresses, who persist in clinging to the very last to the *genre* in which they first attained celebrity, she was quick to realise the incongruity of a woman whose youth was long past, and whose figure had begun to show a decided tendency to *embonpoint*, continuing to impersonate juvenile heroines, and, accordingly, resolved to devote herself to the representation of young matrons. Anxious to retain the services of an actress who assured the success of every work in which she appeared, the directors of the Comédie-Italienne readily entered into her views, and provided her with the parts she desired. Her success in the matronly style was phenomenal, and her triumph in *Camille, ou le souterrain* almost equalled that which she had obtained in *Nina*.

Notwithstanding the laxity of her morals, Madame Dugazon, in private life, possessed many amiable qualities. Gay, light-hearted, and witty, though without a spark

of malice, she was as popular off the stage as upon it ; while, if she were faithful neither to husband nor lover, she was, nevertheless, a staunch friend, who endeared herself to a very large circle of acquaintances. All the authors and composers who worked for her seemed to have held her in the highest esteem : Grétry, Sedaine, Étienne, Marsollier, Dalayrac, Laujon, and many others remained to the last sincerely attached to her. Always sympathetic and ready to oblige, her advice was never sought in vain, and more than one young writer was indebted for his first success to the hints which he had received from the experienced actress. Bouilly, who cherished for her the most lively gratitude and affection, declared that he owed everything to her.<sup>1</sup>

Although never wealthy, for not even the most talented actress or singer of those days could hope for more than a modest competence, while none of her numerous love-affairs, if we except the very brief one with M. Boudreau, seem to have been prompted by any mercenary consideration, she was charitable to the utmost limit of her means, and was ever ready to relieve those in distress. It was at her instigation that, during the severe winter of 1784, special performances were organised for the benefit of the suffering poor and a very large sum realised, which was duly handed over to the Church for distribution. The Church, we are told, was very grateful for this timely assistance. But, with her usual intolerance where the theatrical profession was concerned, she decided that the curés must not be permitted to touch money which came direct from the hands of persons without her pale and, therefore, gave instructions that the alms should be purified by being made to pass through

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 165.



the exchequer of the Lieutenant of Police. This pretty piece of casuistry inspired a wit to the following epistle, supposed to be addressed by St. Augustine to Madame Dugazon and her colleagues :

“Salut à la troupe italique,  
A ce comité catholique  
Dont le cœur loyal s'attendrit  
Sur la calamité publique,  
C'est le fils de sainte Monique,  
C'est Augustin qui vous écrit.  
Oui, mes amis, par cette épître,  
J'abjure maint et maint chapitre  
Où j'ai frondé votre métier  
Comme un tant soit peu diabolique.

Oui, sans être garant de rien,  
Je croirais qu'un comédien  
Risque, s'il est homme de bien,  
D'être sauvé tout comme un autre.  
Un mime, en face d'un apôtre,  
C'est un scandale, dira-t-on ;  
Saint Paul à côté de Rosière,  
Trial vis à vis de saint Pierre,  
Et bienheureuse Dugazon,  
Aux pieds d'un diacre ou d'un vicaire,  
Le paradis serait bouffon.  
Tant pis pour qui s'en scandalise :  
Allez au ciel par vos vertus  
Et laissez clabauder l'Église.”

A Royalist to the core, Madame Dugazon, when the Revolution came, viewed with feelings of indignation and regret the downfall of the King and Queen, the latter of whom had treated her with marked kindness.<sup>1</sup> Nor

<sup>1</sup> Madame Dugazon's feelings were probably intensified by the fact that her husband had espoused the popular side with enthusiasm, and had been appointed aide-de-camp to the notorious Santerre. After the 9th

did she lack the courage of her opinions, as an unsigned letter once in the possession of Mrs. Elliot, the lady who inspired the "First Gentleman in Europe" with so lively a passion, will testify :

"After the 20th of June, 1792, those who wished well to the Royal Family urged the Queen to show herself occasionally in public with the Dauphin, an interesting and beautiful child, and her charming daughter, Madame Royale.

"She went therefore to the Comédie-Italienne, with her children, Madame Élisabeth, the King's sister, and Madame de Tourzel, *gouvernante* of the 'children of France.' This was the last time that the Queen appeared in public. I was in my box, exactly facing that of the Queen ; and, as she was much more interesting than the play, I kept my eyes fixed upon her and her family.

"The piece represented was the *Événements imprévus*, and Madame Dugazon played the soubrette.

"Her Majesty, from the moment she entered the theatre, seemed very sad. She was much affected by the applause of the public, and I saw her several times wipe the tears from her eyes. The little Dauphin, who sat the whole evening upon her knees, appeared anxious to know the cause of his unhappy mother's tears. She was seen to caress him, and the audience seemed moved by the cruel situation of this unhappy Queen.

"There is a duet in this opera sung by the soubrette and the valet, and Madame Dugazon had to say :

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Thermidor, the actor was, for some time, the object of hostile demonstrations whenever he appeared on the stage. But he courageously refused to bow before the storm, and, little by little, the public forgave him. In 1807 he retired from the stage, and, two years later, died, "a raving madman," on an estate which he had bought near Orléans.

“ ‘J’aime mon maître tendrement,  
Ah ! combien j’aime ma maîtresse !’

“ As, in singing these verses, she placed her hand on her heart and looked at the Queen, every one perfectly understood the allusion.

“ Immediately, a number of Jacobins who were among the audience sprang upon the stage, and, if the actors had not concealed Madame Dugazon, they would certainly have killed her. They then drove the poor Queen and her suite from the theatre, and it was all that the guard could do to place them safe and sound in their carriages.

“ In the meanwhile, the Queen’s party had joined battle with the Jacobins ; but the soldiers intervened and the broil had no serious consequences.”

Shortly after this incident, Madame Dugazon temporarily retired from the Comédie-Italienne, on the plea of ill-health ; but really, according to Madame Lebrun, because the public, in a spirit of revenge, had endeavoured to make her sing a revolutionary song upon the stage.<sup>1</sup> In 1795 she reappeared and was received with all the old enthusiasm. At the time of her return, she was merely a pensioner ; but, in 1801, when the two Opéra-Comiques were united in a single troupe at the Théâtre-Feydeau, she was admitted a *sociétaire* and given a seat on the administrative council.

No one was more rejoiced at the Restoration than this most ardent Royalist. “ I feel,” she observed to one of her friends, “ that now I shall die more happy.” She started at once for Saint-Ouen, and was one of the first to whom Louis XVIII. granted an audience. On being admitted to the royal presence, her emotion

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs.*



overcame her, and she threw herself at the King's feet, bathed in tears.

The monarch, himself much moved, raised her up. "You have not forgotten me," said he, kindly, "and I shall always remember the pleasure you gave me at Versailles. I am very grieved that the state of your health has compelled you to retire from the stage. I should be enchanted to see you again."

After her interview with Louis XVIII., we hear little of Madame Dugazon. She lived a very retired life in the midst of a little circle of intimate friends. All her affection was centred in her son Gustave, a young composer, who, at an early age, showed remarkable promise, which, however, does not seem to have been quite fulfilled.<sup>1</sup> Such was her anxiety for his success that when he had an opera in rehearsal, she is said to have invariably fallen ill and not to have recovered until after the first performance.<sup>2</sup>

She died on September 21, 1821, after a long and painful illness, and was buried in Père-Lachaise. The cortège was followed by a large crowd, and Bouilly, her devoted friend of twenty years, pronounced a funeral oration.

<sup>1</sup> He composed three operas: *Marguerite de Waldemar* (1812), *la Noce écossaise* (1814), and *le Chevalier d'industrie* (1818); and two ballets: *les Fiances de Caserte* and *Alfred le Grand*. But none of these pieces seem to have been at all favourably received. He died in 1826, five years after his mother.

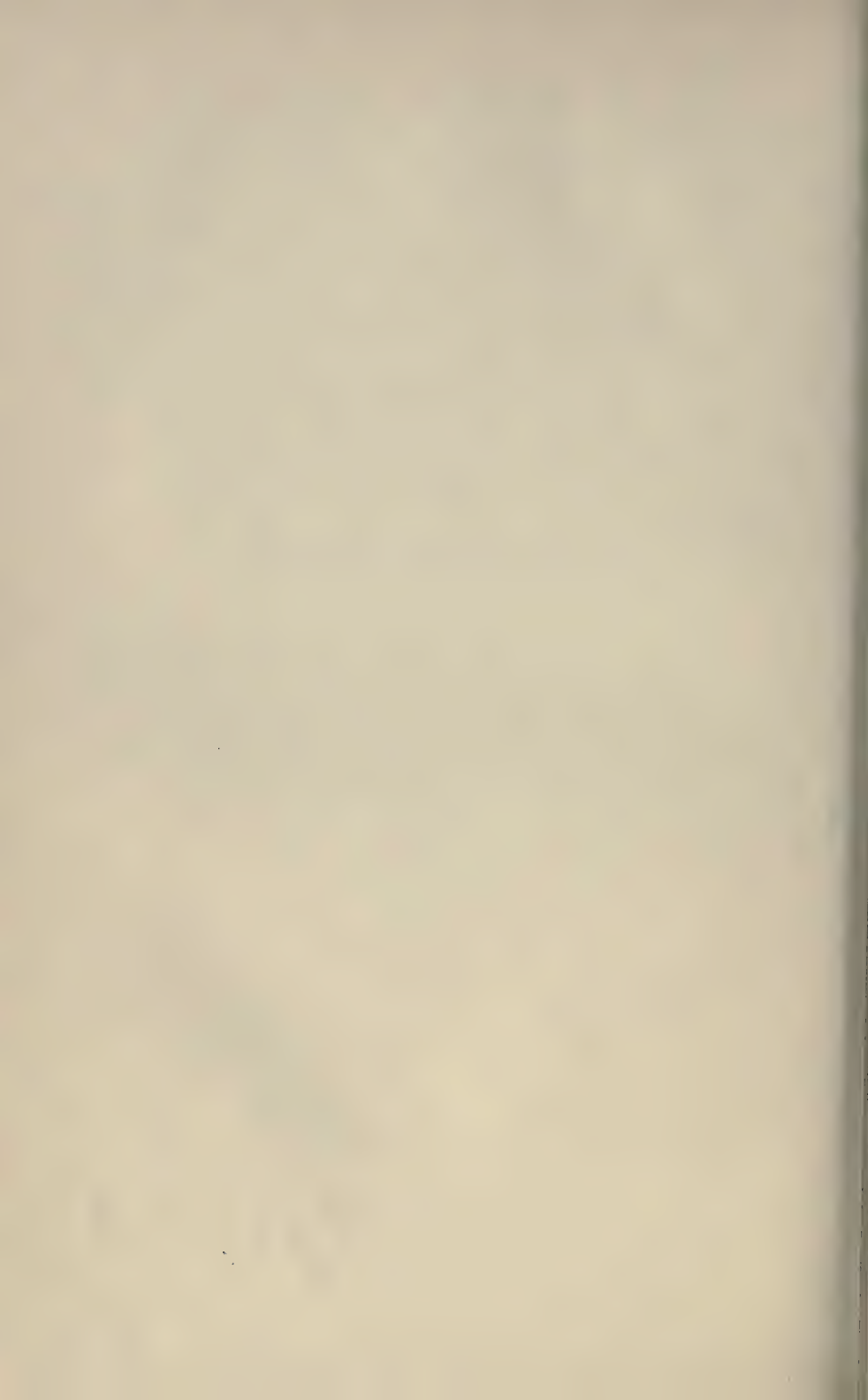
<sup>2</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 170.



V

MADemoiselle CONTAT





## V

### MADEMOISELLE CONTAT

ABOUT the year 1770, a bright-eyed and lively little girl might frequently have been seen to steal behind the scenes of the Comédie-Française, and then, placing herself in some obscure corner, gaze with mingled awe and admiration at the great players as they made their entrances and exits. The father of little Louise Contat—for that was the child's name—seems to have had some employment at the theatre,<sup>1</sup> and she had already gained some distinction in amateur performances. At the age of eleven, it was intended to send her out on tour with a wandering theatrical troupe, but, fortunately, she had already attracted the notice of the Prévilles, who adopted her, and the famous actor himself undertook to train her for the stage.<sup>2</sup> "Never," says Fleury, "did pupil prove more worthy of such a master. The young actress did not master intuitively the secrets of an art which cannot be taught; but the great comedian, charmed with her precocious talent, facilitated her acquirement of those elements of diction, the *solféggi* of speech, so indispensable to a career on the stage."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Louise Contat's *acte de naissance*, which bears date June 16, 1760, her father, Jean François Contat, describes himself as "*soldat de la marine-chaussée et marchand de bas privilégié à Paris*."—Jal, *Dictionnaire de Biographie et d'Histoire*, article "Contat."

<sup>2</sup> Hawkins, "The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century," ii. 209.

<sup>3</sup> *Mémoires de Fleury*, ii. 217.

On February 3, 1776, at the age of fifteen and a half, Louise Contat appeared at the Comédie-Française, as Atalide, in *Bajazet*. Her face and figure pleased the critics, but her talent made but little impression. "Mlle. Contat, has just made her *début*," writes La Harpe, "with a pretty face, but no voice and little talent." Nor was Grimm more favourable. "She is mediocre in tragedy," writes he, "and her gestures are affected; but she has an agreeable face and intelligent eyes." Subsequently, she played Zaïre and Junie, in *Britannicus*, but with hardly more success. In truth, she had no talent for tragedy, and it was only in compliance with the regulations of the theatre that she undertook such parts. When, however, she came to play comedy, particularly comedy of the light, vivacious kind, there was a different tale to tell. Then the careful lessons she had received from Prévile, the greatest comedian of his time, bore fruit in several delightfully clever impersonations, which drew upon her the favourable attention of all lovers of really fine acting, and showed that nothing but experience was needed to make her a worthy successor to Mlle. Dangeville.

But, for some years, the girl's opportunities for distinction were very limited, since no sooner did her rare talents begin to be suspected, than a cabal was organised to obstruct her progress. To begin with, her jealous rivals pitted against her Mlle. Vadé, the daughter of the poet who had bestowed upon Louis XV. the title of "*le Bien-Aimé*," a young lady who had made her first appearance on the same evening as Mlle. Contat herself. Mlle. Vadé, however, had few pretensions to beauty, and still fewer to histrionic fame, and Mlle. Contat showed marked superiority to her opponent, even in the



*jeunes princesses*; a circumstance which Préville took advantage of to secure for his pupil admission as a regular member of the company

Nevertheless, the cabal, far from being discouraged by this rebuff, continued their machinations, and availed themselves of their seniority to exclude the young actress from every part which might afford her a chance of distinction. But, though the poor girl frequently quitted the stage in floods of tears, after the chilly reception which had been accorded her impersonation of some rôle utterly unsuited to her talents, in the end the malignity of her enemies defeated its own purpose. "It stimulated her," says Fleury, "to prove how much she had been wronged. She exerted herself to give importance to the insignificant parts allotted to her, and this kind of feeling is a never-failing spur to the young artiste."

And the time was now at hand when the administration of the Comédie-Française could no longer afford to ignore the claims of the younger members at the bidding of a group of jealous women, several of whom might be regarded as lights of other days. The Comédie-Italienne was now no longer Italian in anything but name; it had become the rival of the national theatre. This rivalry, which had begun in a very humble spirit—the "Italians" gave out that they wished merely to glean in the vast field wherein their brothers of the Comédie-Française reaped so abundantly—gradually developed into one of a very serious character. The "Italians" issued an address, announcing that Thalia, who heretofore had not dared to present herself on the boards of their theatre, except under the auspices of the goddess of harmony, had decided to assert her rights,

reinforced their company by some excellent performers, amongst whom was Madame Verteuil, a lady who had earned a high reputation in the provinces, and produced some excellent comedies, whose success excited the gravest apprehension in the green-room of the Comédie-Française.

To present a bold front to this formidable attack, the administration of that theatre found themselves compelled to bring into the field all their forces and to give every encouragement to new talent. But the opposition to Mlle. Contat was so strong, that it was not until July 1782 that she was afforded an opportunity of exercising her abilities to the full and realising the promise which Prévaille had seen in her as a child.

So far back as the spring of 1775, Palissot had submitted to the Comédie-Française a play called *Les Courtisanes*. The actors rejected it, ostensibly on the ground that it was indelicate, but really, the author suspected, because he was the enemy of their friends, the philosophers. In reply to the ostensible reason, he applied for and obtained the approbation of the censor, Crébillon  *fils* , not perhaps the person best fitted to discriminate between delicacy and indelicacy, since he was the author of some of the most licentious romances of the time, one of which, called *Le Sopha*, had so outraged Madame de Pompadour's sense of propriety that she had caused the writer to be exiled from Paris. Nevertheless, the company held to their previous decision, at the same time addressing to the dramatist an impertinent letter. Out of consideration for his feelings, they said, their first refusal had been based on the indelicacy of the piece. But the *Courtisanes* possessed faults of another kind. It might, however, be performed, if M. Palissot

could contrive to invest it with: (1) action; (2) interest; (3) taste; (4) a plot. In spite of this rebuff, the author had the play printed and, seven years later, through the mediation of the Archbishop of Paris, whom he had succeeded in persuading that his work would promote the cause of morality, Louis XVI. gave orders that it should be put into rehearsal, after suggesting some alterations in the dialogue.

The play was a success, a result largely due to Mlle. Contat's admirable impersonation of the heroine, the courtesan Rosalie, for more than one of the situations was decidedly "risky," while the fact that Sophanès, the villain of the piece—and a particularly odious villain—was a philosopher and man of letters by no means commended itself to many of the habitués of the pit.<sup>1</sup>

"Mlle. Contat," wrote Grimm, "secured in the part of Rosalie a success which she had never yet obtained. The situation in the second act appeared to be carried a little further than stage decorum seems to permit of. But the situation is material to the plot, and, thanks to the charming figure of the heroine, it would have been difficult not to accord indulgence to the tableau. Moreover, it was tolerated, though not without some murmuring."

From the performance of this comedy we may date the opening of Louise Contat's theatrical career. In the following December, she secured another triumph as the heroine of Dubuisson's *Vieux Garçon*, and Grimm wrote: "Mlle. Contat, who makes every day fresh progress, appeared charming in the part of Sophie. At

<sup>1</sup> The critic of the *Mercur* wrote: "What respect can they (men of letters) hope to inspire, when they themselves become the first to denounce their own secret vices, and, to sum up all in one word, when their mind seems to make a jest of calumniating their heart?"



Easter 1783, on the retirement of the accomplished and virtuous Mlle. d'Oigny, the object of the eulogy of Fréron which excited Mlle. Clairon to so much indignation,<sup>1</sup> she succeeded to her *emploi*," and secured daily fresh successes.<sup>2</sup>

But it was in the part of Suzanne in Beaumarchais's immortal comedy, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, that Louise Contat was to attain celebrity. This play had been completed in 1781; but to write it was one thing, to get it produced was quite another. Louis XVI. read the manuscript himself and, though his political insight was none of the keenest, could not fail to recognise its dangerous tendencies. He pronounced it "detestable" and "unactable," and, for more than two years, no argument could induce him to permit its being performed. It was in vain that Beaumarchais stimulated public curiosity to fever heat by frequent readings of his play, at his own house or in various fashionable salons. It was in vain that his friends at Court, headed by the Comte de Vaudreuil, one of the most prominent members of the Queen's social circle,<sup>3</sup> allowed no opportunity to

<sup>1</sup> For an account of this affair, see the author's "Queens of the French Stage," p. 324 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> La Harpe, *Correspondance littéraire*, iv. 51.

<sup>3</sup> The friendship between Beaumarchais and the Comte de Vaudreuil had its origin in the following incident. The latter had had a dispute, at one of the Court theatres, with a M. de Miromesnil, a distinguished amateur actor, as to the manner in which drunkenness should be depicted on the stage. Some of the company jestingly ascribed the count's remarks to personal experience. "Nay," answered Vaudreuil, "they are not my own. I borrow the lesson from the great Garrick, who gave it on the Boulevards to Prévile, who acted upon it before a few working men, and caused them to take the mimicry for reality." Miromesnil disputed the authenticity of the anecdote, and, on being assured that it was true, offered to lay a heavy wager that a Bouvelard was not the place. Beaumarchais happened to be standing by. "Take the wager," he whispered to the

slip of extolling the merits of the work. The King remained adamant. Once indeed it seemed to the dramatist that the battle had all but been won. Thanks to the efforts of Vaudreuil, who had succeeded in gaining over Marie Antoinette to his side, the players suddenly received orders from Versailles to rehearse the play in secret for a private performance. Beaumarchais, after reading his piece to the assembled company, determined to consult Mlle. Contat as to the cast, the result being that Dazincourt was set down for Figaro, Molé for Almaviva, the same character which he had so successfully represented in the *Barbier de Seville*, Mlle. Sainval for the Countess, and pretty Mlle. Olivier for the Page; while Prévile, who, conscious of failing memory and sprightliness, had refused the part of the Barber, contented himself with the comparatively unimportant rôle of Brid'oison. Finally, Mlle. Contat was entrusted with the all-important part of Suzanne, a choice which caused considerable astonishment, as, admirable though the young actress was as an *amoureuse*, she had never yet attempted anything of this kind. Mlle. Fanier, the senior soubrette, protested warmly against the nomination and claimed Suzanne for herself. But Beaumarchais, who had early recognised the high qualities of Mlle. Contat and had every confidence in her versatility, had from the first intended the part of the heroine for her, and would listen to no remonstrance. Nor had he any reason to regret his decision.

Everything being in readiness, it was decided that count; "it is yours." Vaudreuil did so. Beaumarchais left the theatre, and shortly afterwards returned with a letter, in which Garrick himself stated that the incident occurred on the Bouvelards. From that moment, the count evinced a warm interest in the dramatist's fortunes.—Hawkins, "The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century," ii. 291.

the performance should be given at the Théâtre des Menus-Plaisirs, where the Comte de Vaudreuil's influence was paramount, on June 13, 1783. The interest it excited was intense. As the appointed hour drew near, the approaches to the theatre were blocked by hundreds of coaches; all the fashionable world seemed determined to be present. The consternation, therefore, may be imagined when a rumour began to spread that there would be no play that evening; that the King had forbidden the performance. At first, the gaily-dressed crowd was inclined to be incredulous. But a notice posted on the doors of the theatre confirmed the rumour, and sent them away, complaining bitterly of the "oppression" and "tyranny" of the King, who at the eleventh hour had sent orders, through his Minister of the Household, the Baron de Breteuil, prohibiting the representation of *Le Mariage de Figaro* under pain of disobedience, and, the next day, caused the players to be summoned before the Lieutenant of Police, when the prohibition was repeated in a form employed by the royal authority only on the gravest occasions.

But Beaumarchais was not the man to despair. He withdrew to London, ostensibly on commercial business, but really, no doubt, to be out of the way the while Vaudreuil solicited and obtained the King's consent to the *Mariage de Figaro* being performed in the course of a fête which the count intended to give at his country-house at Gennevilliers. "The Comte d'Artois," wrote the Duc de Fronsac to Beaumarchais from that place, "is coming to hunt here about the 18th (September), and the Duc de Polignac with his party to sup. Vaudreuil has consulted me as to giving them a play, as we have a capital room. I told him that he could not find



a more charming one than the *Mariage de Figaro*. The King has given his consent, have we yours ? ”

Beaumarchais, on his return to Paris, duly gave his “consent,” but only on condition that the play should be re-examined. The royal veto, said he, had exposed his work to the charge of immorality, and until that stigma had been removed from it by a formal approbation, on no consideration would he allow it to be played. It was a masterly move, for while no censor would be likely to forbid an entertainment sanctioned by the King, the desired approbation, besides stimulating the curiosity of the public, would have the effect of covering his Majesty’s opposition to the piece with ridicule. One would have supposed that the authorities would have been sufficiently alert to detect the trap laid for them, but they walked into it without hesitation, and sent the manuscript to the historian Gaillard,<sup>1</sup> who reported to the Lieutenant of Police as follows :

“Allow me, Monsieur, to inform you of my opinion with regard to the comedy entitled *La Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro*. I have heard it read and read it myself with all the attention of which I am capable, and I confess that I see no danger in allowing it to be performed, when corrected in two places, and when some *mots* have been suppressed, of which a malicious abuse or a dangerous and wicked application might be made. The piece is a very gay one ; but when the gaities, although approaching what are called ‘*gaudrioles*,’ are not indecent, they amuse without doing harm.

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Henri Gaillard (1726–1806). His chief works were : *L’Histoire de François I<sup>er</sup>, dit le Grand Roi et le Père des Lettres* (1766–1769) ; *L’Histoire de la Rivalité de la France et de l’Angleterre* (1771–1777), which procured him admission to the Academy ; and *L’Histoire de la Rivalité de la France et de l’Espagne* (1800).

Gay people are not dangerous, and State troubles, conspiracies, assassinations, and all the horrors we read of in history of all ages show us that they have been conceived, ripened, and executed by reserved, sad, and sullen people. The piece is besides called *La Folle Journée*, and Figaro, the hero of that piece, is known in the comedy of the *Barbier de Seville*, of which this is a continuation, as one of those intriguers of the lower class, whose examples are not dangerous for any man of the world. Besides, I think that by raising objections to things of little importance, as if they were dangerous, a value is imparted to them which they themselves do not possess, and foolish or ill-natured people are inspired with a fear or suspicion of danger, which has no reality."

Then, after having proposed two suppressions, one of the word "minister," the other of a passage alluding to the judgment of Solomon, Gaillard concludes thus :

"This piece appears to be well written. The personages speak as they ought, according to their station, and I think it very likely to attract more spectators to the Comédie and, consequently, what it most requires—large receipts." <sup>1</sup>

Gaillard's suggestions, which left untouched practically the whole of the sarcasms levelled at the Government, were readily agreed to by Beaumarchais, who lost no opportunity of exaggerating their importance in the eyes of the world, and succeeded in extracting from the Lieutenant of Police a promise that henceforward the comedy should be "deemed the property of his Majesty's players," *i.e.*, put in the way of being represented at the theatre.

<sup>1</sup> Loménie, *Beaumarchais et son temps*, iv

The *Mariage de Figaro* was then played in the large room at Gennevilliers, apparently, as a favour somewhat reluctantly conceded by the author, and was received with enthusiastic applause by the distinguished company, though, if Madame Vigée Lebrun is to be believed, every one was surprised that the Comte de Vaudreuil should have permitted a play which contained so many sarcastic allusions to the Court to be performed before an audience which consisted almost entirely of courtiers, with "our excellent prince," the Comte d'Artois, at their head. According to the same authority, the favourable reception accorded his comedy quite turned Beaumarchais's head. "He rushed about like a madman, and, on some one complaining of the heat, he would not allow time for the windows to be opened, but broke all the panes with his cane."<sup>1</sup> "*Il a doublement cassé les vitres,*" it was remarked.

The very day after the performance at Gennevilliers, Beaumarchais, sensible of the advantage he had gained, formally applied to the Lieutenant of Police for permission to have his play brought out. But that official replied that the King's prohibition, given the day of the performance at the Menus-Plaisirs, was still in force, and that he must refer the matter to his Majesty. The latter, though alarmed by the ferment he had raised, for all Paris and Versailles were now loudly clamouring for the production of the *Mariage*, could not make up his mind to allow the production of a piece which he considered both dangerous and immoral, and resolved to postpone the evil day so long as he possibly could. In this decision, it appeared, he was influenced largely by the Baron de Breteuil, who was exceedingly prejudiced

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs*, i. 100.



against the play, and to conciliate that nobleman all Beaumarchais's efforts were henceforth directed. The baron was devoted to the Queen and the Comte d'Artois, and was himself by no means insensible to courtly seduction; and the dramatist, aware of this, succeeded not only in obtaining the influence of the Comte d'Artois, but even on prevailing on Marie Antoinette to say a word on his behalf. Both the Queen and the prince assured the Minister that, in addition to the corrections required in the *Mariage de Figaro* by Gaillard, the author was prepared to make still further alterations, if such were considered necessary. Breteuil thereupon assumed a more friendly attitude, but declared that before he could interest himself in the fate of the piece, he must hear it carefully read, in the presence of some literary men of his own selection.

"On the day appointed," says Fleury, "Beaumarchais proceeded with his manuscript to the baron's residence, where he found assembled, besides the master of the house, MM. Gaillard, Champfort, Rulhière, Madame de Matignon, the Minister's daughter, and several other ladies, her friends. Beaumarchais began by declaring that he would submit without reserve to all corrections and omissions which the ladies and gentlemen present might deem requisite. He began reading, he was stopped; some remarks were made, and a little discussion arose. At every interruption, Beaumarchais yielded the point in dispute. But when the reading was ended, he went over the whole ground again, defending the smallest details with so much address, such forcible reasoning, and such captivating pleasantry, that he completely silenced his censors. They laughed and applauded, and, at length, all declared that the play

was ‘a most original and unique production.’ Instead of omissions, additions were proposed. Every one of the party was eager to interpolate a word or two. M. de Breteuil suggested a *bon mot*, which Beaumarchais thankfully accepted. ‘This will save the fourth act,’ said he. Madame de Matignon chose the colour for the Page’s ribbon. The colour was approved; it would become quite the rage. ‘Who would not be proud to wear Madame de Matignon’s colours?’ said Beaumarchais. ‘But M. de Breteuil’s *bon mot* would not be heard, the elegant ribbon would not be seen, if the second Figaro were not permitted to appear on the stage.’ That *he* must appear was eventually the unanimous opinion.”<sup>1</sup>

The astute dramatist completely succeeded in throwing dust in the eyes of the Baron de Breteuil, and, though Louis XVI. contrived to defer his inevitable surrender for some months longer, by declaring that the play must be re-examined and causing six censors to be appointed for that purpose, on April 27, 1784, the bills of the Comédie-Française, posted up in every quarter of Paris, triumphantly announced the production that evening of

“Le Mariage de Figaro  
ou  
La Folle Journée.”

The description of the first performance of Beaumarchais’s masterpiece is to be found in every history of the period. It is one of the best-known souvenirs of the eighteenth century. Let us, however, borrow the account given in the *Mémoires* of Mlle. Contat’s colleague and friend, the actor Fleury :

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Fleury*, ii. 413.

“ Many hours before the opening of the ticket-office I verily believe that half the population of Paris was at the doors. Here was a triumph for Beaumarchais ! If he sighed for popularity, he had gained it. Persons of the highest rank, even Princes of the Blood, besieged him with letters imploring to be favoured with the author’s tickets. At eleven o’clock in the forenoon, the Duchesse de Bourbon sent her valet to the office to wait until the distribution of the tickets, which was to take place at four o’clock. At two o’clock, the Duchesse d’Ossun laid aside her accustomed dignity and hauteur and herself solicited the crowd to allow her to pass ; Madame de Talleyrand, doing violence to her parsimonious disposition, paid triple price for a box. *Cordons bleus* were seen elbowing their way through the crowd, jostled by Savoyards ; the guards were dispersed, the doors forced open, the iron bars broken down, and an inconceivable scene of confusion and danger ensued. One half of the people had been unable to procure tickets, and threw their admission money to the doorkeepers as they passed, or rather, as they were carried along. But, whilst all this was happening outside, the disorder which prevailed within the theatre was, if possible, still greater. No less than three hundred persons who had procured tickets at an early period dined in the boxes. Our theatre seemed transformed into a tavern ; nothing was heard but the clattering of plates and the drawing of corks. Then, when the audience were assembled, what a brilliant picture presented itself ! The *élite* of the rank and talent of Paris was congregated there. What a radiant line of beauty was exhibited by the first tier of boxes.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Fleury*, ii. 415 et seq.



The success of the piece was immense, incredible, surpassing even the fondest hopes of the author and actors. From the opening scene the comedy carried the audience along with it, and each of the pointed allusions to State abuses was greeted with vociferous and prolonged applause, which was by no means confined to the *parterre*. All the principal performers distinguished themselves. Dazincourt played Figaro with all his characteristic humour and sprightliness, at the same time relieving the character from any appearance of vulgarity; Molé was an elegant and dignified Almaviva; Mlle. Sainval, whose efforts had hitherto been mainly confined to tragedy, displayed in the part of the Countess an aptitude for high comedy which surprised as much as it delighted the audience; Mlle. Olivier threw the most enchanting archness and *espièglerie* into the rôle of the Page; while old Prévillè rendered Brid'oison a masterly character.

But the gem of the whole performance was undoubtedly Mlle. Contat's impersonation of Suzanne, wherein she more than justified Beaumarchais's confidence in her versatility, and astonished even her most devout admirers by the gaiety and *entrain* with which she sustained the part. As soon as the curtain fell, Prévillè ran up to her, and, embracing her, warmly exclaimed: "This is my first infidelity to Mlle. Dangeville!"

The verdict of the public was confirmed by the critics. "Mlle. Contat, in the rôle of Suzanne," says the *Mercure*, "has established fresh claims to the applause of connoisseurs, by a performance frank, intelligent, and humorous." "The demoiselle Contat," says the *Journal de Paris*, "rendered Suzanne with the most piquant grace." And—highest tribute of all—that most captious

of critics, La Harpe, declared that she "rendered the part of Suzanne to perfection."

From that evening Louise Contat stood forth as one of the brightest stars of the Comédie-Française and as a truly great actress.

At the time when she created the part of Suzanne in the *Mariage de Figaro*, Louise Contat was twenty-four years of age and in the zenith of her beauty. Without being tall, her figure was admirably proportioned, and "her whole person breathed an air of supreme distinction." Her face, a charming oval, was illumined by a pair of beautiful eyes, "by turns languishing or flashing with mischief." An exquisite mouth, perfect teeth, and a ravishing smile completed the picture, and enslaved all with whom she came in contact.

Yet her beauty was not perfect. "She is an admirable Venus," says a pamphlet of the time, "cut by some great sculptor from a block of the purest marble. Only he had not time to finish his work, and entrusted the hands and feet to one of his workmen."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, she knew how to conceal these imperfections, and on the stage they passed unnoticed.

It is hardly necessary to remark that so fascinating and talented a young woman did not lack for both noble and wealthy adorers. But Mlle. Contat, in the early stages of her career, was of a romantic disposition, and her first lover possessed neither qualification. This much-envied individual was a certain Chevalier de Lubsac, an officer of the Royal Household, whose handsome face and ready wit more than atoned, in the lady's eyes, for his empty purse and the brevity of his pedigree.

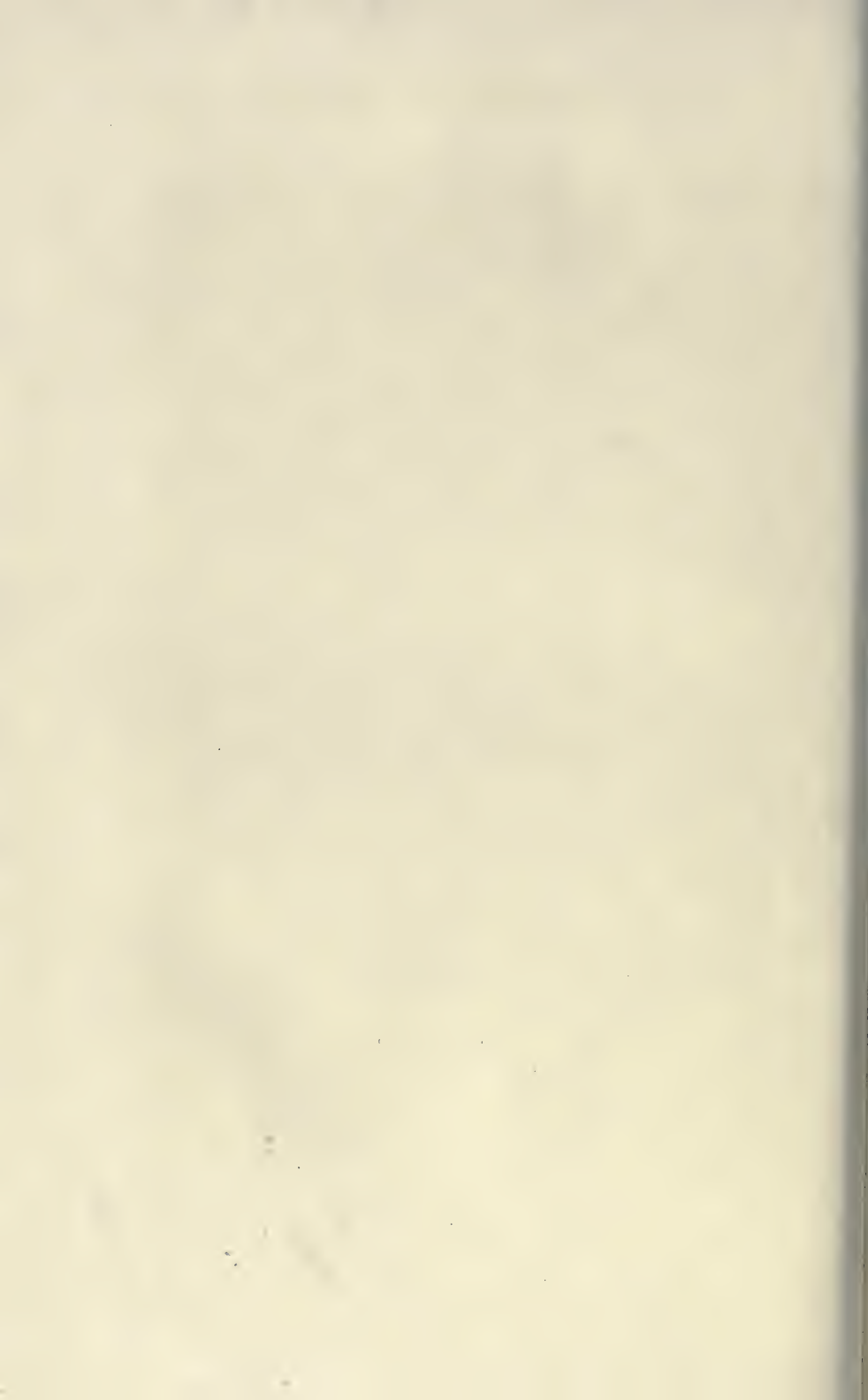
<sup>1</sup> Cited by Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 180.



LOUISE CONTAT

After the painting by DUTERTRE





Soon, however, the actress had cause to regret her choice. M. de Lubsac not only, on occasion, drank a great deal more wine than was good for him, but he was a confirmed and most reckless gambler, who would cheerfully stake everything he possessed on the turn of a card. One evening, when on the point of starting for a fête, Mlle. Contat went to her jewel-case. To her consternation, it was empty; rings, brooches, pendants, earrings, necklaces—all had disappeared! Supposing that thieves had been at work, the distracted lady gave orders that the police should be summoned, when Lubsac, who was present, intervened and, falling on his knees, confessed that he was the culprit and entreated her pardon. Yielding to a sudden temptation, he had carried off and pledged the whole of the missing property, in order to obtain the sinews of war. But alas! his luck had been execrable; he had lost every sou.

The indignation of the actress and the despair of the unhappy lover may be imagined.

“Ah!” cried he, wringing his hands, “had I but a few louis, I could speedily repair the injury I have done you.”

“How so?” inquired Mlle. Contat, who perceived a ray of hope.

“Yes,” resumed the contrite Lubsac, “I feel that I am in the vein this evening. But I have nothing to stake, nothing whatever.”

The repentance of the criminal touched the actress’s heart. Smiling through her tears, she produced two louis—the last she had in the world—and handed them to the chevalier, who hurried off to the gaming-table. In less than an hour he returned, transported with joy. Fortune had smiled upon him; he brought with him

all the jewellery he had pledged, and had still a few louis in his pocket.

The *affaire* with M. de Lubsac lasted but a few months, at the end of which Mlle. Contat had had enough of him and his vagaries and gave him his *congé*. A wealthy financier aspired to the vacant place in the lady's affections, became an assiduous frequenter of the Comédie, and professed his readiness to lay his heart and his money-bags at her feet. But the actress would have nothing to say to him, and intimated in unmistakable terms that neither his heart nor his money-bags had any attraction for her. Nevertheless, Plutus continued to prosecute his suit, and one evening, while Mlle. Contat, was standing in the wings, talking with the Duc de Laval, he approached and, "after having reminded her that he had already adored her for a long while, inquired if his turn to be loved had not arrived." The actress indignant at such presumption, angrily retorted that "if he were ten times richer than he was, she would not recognise his right to behave with such impertinence"; and, with that, turned her back upon him.

It must not be supposed, however, that Mlle. Contat was indifferent to riches, when the person who possessed them had other claims to her regard; and, some months after the above episode, we find her squandering right merrily the patrimony of the Marquis de Maupeou.

The Marquis de Maupeou was very rich and very much in love; never could actress have desired a more generous admirer. He furnished a house for her, loaded her with presents, and decked her with magnificent diamonds. Moreover, he was as submissive as a slave, and obeyed without a murmur her slightest caprice. But Mlle. Contat must have been even more difficult to please



than the generality of her sex, since even this paragon of lovers did not long satisfy her. Perhaps his very devotion and readiness to submit to her will constituted a fault in her eyes. Any way, she dismissed him, and, though the lovelorn marquis "became so distracted through grief, that he proposed to Mlle. Contat to marry her and take her away from France," she declined the offer.

For the lady had higher views. She had just made a conquest of the second gentleman in the land after the King, Madame Lebrun's "excellent prince," the Comte d'Artois, to wit. What woman could resist a Prince of the Blood? Certainly not an actress of the Comédie-Française. To have done so would have been to render herself guilty of *lèse-majesté*.

Mlle. Contat was a proud woman indeed. Nevertheless, there were days when she regretted the time when the bottomless purse of the Marquis de Maupeou had been at her disposal. For the liberality of her royal lover was very far from being in accordance with what one might have expected from so great a personage. If his revenues were large, he told her, his expenses were enormous—it is probable that Mlle. Contat only possessed a fraction of the august heart—and often he was hard put for even a handful of louis.

The actress received these excuses in good part; but, being privately of opinion that it was the will and not the means which the prince lacked, had recourse to a little ruse, in order to stimulate his generosity.

On a piece of stamped paper she forged a judgment-summons, requiring her to pay a sum of 10,000 livres, and left it, as if by accident, on her chimney-piece. Soon afterwards, his Royal Highness, happening to call upon

his inamorata, caught sight of the paper and wished to read it. Mlle. Contat begged him not to do so, and pretended to snatch it from him ; but, at length, with much apparent reluctance, permitted him to satisfy his curiosity.

The prince read the document, said that the actress was very wrong not to have taken him into her confidence in regard to her embarrassments, and, having promised to take the debt upon himself, carried the summons away with him. Next day, he sent her a letter, which she eagerly opened, only to find, instead of the expected 10,000 livres, another legal document, which provided that the warrant which she had been at such pains to fabricate should not be put in force for twelve months.

Great was the lady's disgust at the failure of her little scheme. For a moment, she was almost resolved to forsake the parsimonious prince for a less distinguished but more open-handed adorer. However, her indignation did not last very long, as the following morning the Comte d'Artois, who had only intended to indulge in a little joke at his mistress's expense, sent her, by way of compensation for her disappointment, a magnificent present.

It was easy for a Prince of the Blood to be generous, in those days, without untying his purse-strings. Thus the count obtained for his charming mistress an authorisation to play the prohibited game of *biribi* at her house, a privilege which the actress ceded to the keeper of a tennis-court for the sum of one hundred louis a month. This agreeable addition to her income, however, was not of long duration, since, at the end of a few months, the Parliament of Paris made one of its periodical on-

slaughters upon gambling-houses, and that of Mlle. Contat was closed by orders of the Lieutenant of Police.

Misfortunes seldom come singly. Soon after the closing of the gambling-house, Mlle. Contat presented the Comte d'Artois with a pledge of her gratitude and affection in the shape of a little daughter. But, by this time, the relations between the actress and the prince had become somewhat strained. Perhaps, the latter had grown tired of the lady's extravagance and caprices; perhaps he had his doubts as to whether he was the sole tenant of her heart, or possibly he was troubled by retrospective scruples. However that may be, he forgot his promises and declined to recognise the child, about whom we shall have something to say hereafter.

After this, it is hardly surprising to learn that Mlle. Contat's connection with her august admirer came to a close, M. Desentelles, the Intendant des Menus-Plaisirs, becoming the official successor of the prince. We say *official* successor, as it was rumoured in the *foyer* of the Comédie-Française that the actor Fleury was by no means indifferent to the charms of his fair colleague, and that he did not sigh in vain.

Mlle. Contat's rupture with the Comte d'Artois plunged the actress into a sea of financial troubles. During their connection, she had, of course, maintained an establishment befitting the mistress of the King's brother, and had contracted debts on a proportionate scale. So long as there seemed a reasonable prospect of the prince taking these liabilities on himself, her creditors had been complacent enough. But, the moment they learned that the *liaison* was at an end, they became clamorous for payment and threatened executions and other unpleasant methods of recovering their due. M. Desentelles and



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Fleury did their best to pacify them, but that was little enough; and, in her despair, Mlle. Contat was compelled to humiliate herself so far as to apply for assistance to her former adorers: to the Marquis de Maupeou, whom she had discarded, to the Comte d'Artois, who had discarded her. The marquis and the prince responded nobly to the appeal, the latter sending her no less than three thousand louis; and the most troublesome claims were satisfied.

The favour of M. Desentelles lasted but a short while, and, after his dismissal, Mlle. Contat seems to have had enough of gallantry, or, at least, of official lovers. Fleury, however, remained always her faithful and devoted friend, and speaks of her in his *Mémoires* as a "good and excellent sister." He had done much to encourage her in the days when jealous intrigues had relegated her to the background, and, in return, he was indebted to her for the part which made his reputation as an actor. With the piece which provided him with this opportunity Mlle. Contat had become acquainted in rather a romantic way.

One afternoon, in the winter of 1788-1789, the actress was driving in a whisky, a kind of vehicle then much affected by ladies of fashion. Unfortunately for the safety of pedestrians, she held the reins with considerably more grace than skill, and about the middle of the Pont-Neuf narrowly escaped knocking down a middle-aged gentleman, who was crossing the road. "Monsieur," she exclaimed, pulling up sharply, "pray what do you mean by running against my horse in that fashion?" "Madame," was the reply, "I really think that the horse ran against me." "Impossible, Moniseur. My horse is quite under control. Besides, I called out 'gare!'"

You never looked up.” “Madame,” said the gentleman, with a profound *congé*, “you have more reason to cry ‘*gare*’ now that I do look up.”

Convinced, from his courtly manners and distinguished air, that the stranger must be a personage of high rank, Mlle. Contat made several attempts to ascertain his identity, but without success, and had well-nigh forgotten the adventure, when one night, at the theatre, about a month later, a note was brought to her. It was to the effect that the gentleman who had had the privilege of a few moments’ conversation with her on the Pont-Neuf wished to know whether, as a great favour, the “modern *Thalia*” would devote a leisure hour to a rehearsal, at the Comédie-Italienne, of a two-act piece in which he was greatly interested. “Henri” was the signature.

Mlle. Contat at once repaired to the theatre mentioned; but found that the author of the only play in preparation there was a comparatively young man, a certain Baron Ernest von Manteufel, a relative of the last Grand Duke of Courland. “*Ma foi!*” exclaimed she, to the composer Dezède, who presented him to her, “I must explain my error in coming hither.” And the letter was produced. The baron, on reading it, seemed much moved. “Henri,” he cried, “ever noble, generous, and true!” “And to me unknown,” remarked the actress, smiling. “Unknown, Mademoiselle? Why all the world knows him!” “Nay, Monsieur, there is at least one person in the world who is not in the secret, and that person is myself.” “Can you possibly be unaware, Mademoiselle, that he is Prince Henry of Prussia [brother of Frederick the Great].” “I breathe again,” said Mademoiselle Contat. “Brother of a king and a

hero into the bargain! I pardon him for the sake of his *coup de théâtre*." "And for the sake of his recommendation," the author continued, "I hope you will befriend me."

He then explained that he was in a serious difficulty. The success of his first act depended upon the impersonation of a tavern-hostess. This part he had, of course, intended for Madame Dugazon; but that lady had declined it, on the ground that it was unworthy of her talents; and the actress who was now studying it was plainly unequal to the task. Would Mlle. Contat use her good offices to induce Madame Dugazon to reconsider her decision.

Mlle. Contat declared such a negotiation impossible; to take a part from an actress in possession of it, and force it upon one who had rejected it would be a breach of the etiquette of her profession. But she sat out the rehearsal, and saw at once that the piece, which was a *comédie à ariettes*—music by Dezède—written round a pleasing little incident in the life of Frederick the Great, which had very probably been related to the author by Prince Henry of Prussia, might prove an immense success at the Comédie-Française, and, moreover, provide her friend Fleury with one of those "creations" which, when they succeed, establish the reputation of an actor.

She accordingly talked the matter over with the author and Dezède, the result being that the piece, which was entitled *Auguste et Théodore, ou les Deux Pages*—it is known to fame by its sub-title—was transferred from the "Italians" to the Comédie-Française, where it was produced on March 6, 1789, Fleury playing the principal part, with Mlle. Contat as the hostess of the tavern.



The anticipations of the actress were fully verified. *Les Deux Pages* was received with the most unbounded enthusiasm ; Fleury made of the warrior king a masterpiece which placed him in the very front rank of his profession ;<sup>1</sup> while she herself, we are assured, was “irresistible, her beauty and frank gaiety carrying all before them.”

But we are anticipating. Between the *Mariage de Figaro* and the production of *Les Deux Pages* four years had elapsed—years in which Louise Contat had confirmed the great reputation which her creation of Suzanne had secured for her by a series of masterly impersonations. In high comedy, indeed, she was supreme and without a rival. “In her hands the fan became a sceptre. No one comprehended Molière better ; no one knew how to interpret more naturally the spirit of Marivaux. She was reproached with a certain amount of affectation ; but she knew how to combine the haughty disposition of Célimène with the intelligent vivacity of Dorine. Seductive voice, eloquent eye, charming smile, infinite tact, amiable dignity, perfect knowledge of situations—everything in her combined to enchant an audience. None of the characteristics which distinguished the

<sup>1</sup> And well he deserved his triumph, for surely never had actor been at more pains to secure a perfect resemblance to the character he was to impersonate ! “In the first place,” he tells us, in his *Mémoires*, “I sought to imbue myself with the idea that my apartments were in Potsdam, instead of in Paris ; and I resolved to retire to rest, to take my meals, to move, and speak, during two whole months, in the full persuasion that I was Frederick the Great. The better to identify myself with the character, I used every morning to dress myself in the military coat, hat, boots, &c., I had ordered for the part. Thus equipped, I would seat myself before my looking-glass, at one side of which hung Ramberg’s picture of the King. Then, with the help of hair pencils and a palette spread with black, white, red, blue, and yellow, I endeavoured to paint my face to the resemblance of the picture.”

society of the old régime had escaped her, and 'from head to foot she was *grande dame*.'"<sup>1</sup>

Her triumphs were not confined to the capital. She made provincial tours—tours which were one long series of ovations, in which crowns of laurels were showered upon her, and thousands of complimentary verses composed in her honour. Once, when playing with Molé, at Marseilles, the following madrigal was addressed to them :

“ Hier un enfant d'Hélicon  
D'un secret important m'a donné connaissance.  
Ami, les neuf sœurs d'Apollon  
N'ont pas toujours été si chastes que l'on pense ;  
Thalie (ah ! qui l'eût cru), sans bruit et sans éclat,  
À deux enfants donna naissance,  
L'un est Molé, l'autre est Contat.”

Like nearly all the members of her profession, Mlle. Contat was exceedingly charitable, and this fact no doubt contributed not a little to the immense popularity which she enjoyed with the playgoing public. At Lyons, on one occasion, she gave a performance for the benefit of the poor of the city, which realised between three and four thousand livres. At Toulouse, where the ten performances originally arranged for had failed to satisfy the enthusiasm of the public, she gave an eleventh, and distributed the proceeds amidst the poor of Baréges, whither she was proceeding to take the waters. Once, when visiting an asylum for persons who had been born blind, to converse with the inmates and inscribe her name on the list of benefactors, she was the recipient of a pretty compliment from a blind poet, who improvised a quatrain, in which he gallantly informed her that she

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 191

should not so much pity those who had lost their eyes, as those who had been made wretched by the lustre of her own :

“ Digne soutien de l'amiable Thalie,  
Sur notre sort pourquoi vous attendre,  
S'il est quelques mortels qui maudissent la vie,  
Ce sont que vos yeux ont réduits à souffrir . . . ”

By right of her beauty, her talent, and her successes, Mlle. Contat believed herself invested with the right of imposing her will upon her comrades and dramatic authors. With the latter she was frequently at variance. During the rehearsals of Alexandre Duval's *Edouard en Écosse*, she demanded some alteration in one of the scenes. The author refused, declaring that the alteration in question would upset all his combinations, and, on the actress insisting on his compliance with her views, appealed to the other players, who, however, maintained a discreet silence, having no mind to contradict their imperious comrade. Beside herself with passion, the latter threw her part at the author's head, “swearing by all her gods that nothing should induce her to act in any piece of his.” Duval, thereupon, took his manuscript from the hands of the prompters, and stalked out of the theatre, coldly observing that unless the piece was to be played as he had written it, it should not be played at all. A reconciliation between actress and author was subsequently effected, and the play produced, but, some time later, Duval offended the lady beyond all hope of forgiveness, by daring to offer to Madame Talma a part which she had marked for her own.<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Contat's jealousy, indeed, caused her to be any-

<sup>1</sup> M. Victor du Bled, *Les Comédiens français pendant la Révolution*, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. cxxiv.



thing but beloved by her fair comrades at the Comédie-Française. Like Madame Saint-Huberty at the Opera, she could not endure a rival on the stage. She absolutely refused to be doubled, and, even when illness prevented her appearing, it was only with the greatest difficulty that she could be persuaded to allow any one to replace her.

Moreover, she not infrequently abused her position as queen of the theatre, and her endeavours to push the fortunes of her sister, Émilie Contat, to whom she was always deeply attached, at the expense of more deserving young actresses, was a fruitful source of dissension. Émilie, who had made her *début*, in the autumn of 1784, as Fanchette, in the *Mariage de Figaro*, was very far from the "deplorable actress" which Gaboriau declares her to have been,<sup>1</sup> and in her rendering of the soubrettes of Molière acquired some little distinction. At the same time, she had no pretensions to be the equal of Mlle. Vanhove, who had made her first appearance at the same time; and Mlle. Contat's efforts to secure precedence for her sister were strongly resented not only in the theatre but outside it, and drew upon her many violent reproaches in both prose and verse. Marie Antoinette herself intervened on behalf of Mlle. Vanhove, whom she had taken under her protection, and secured for her a part which Louise Contat had intended for her beloved Émilie. When the all-powerful actress learnt that her wishes had been subordinated to those of royalty, she exclaimed: "This Queen has a great deal of influence!"

Nevertheless, Mlle. Contat was sincerely attached to the Royal Family, and to Marie Antoinette in particular. One day, the Queen, who intended to be present

<sup>1</sup> *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 194

at a representation of the *Gouvernante*, sent her word that she should like to see her play the principal rôle. The part was suited neither to the age nor the talent of the lively actress, and was, besides, a long and difficult one. She might, therefore, have fairly begged to be excused, but, eager to please the Queen, she at once began to study it. In less than two days, she had mastered the five hundred verses of which it consisted, and obtained a great success. Writing to one of her friends soon afterwards, she observed, in allusion to this *tour de force* : " I was ignorant where the seat of memory lay ; I know now that it is in the heart." This letter, found in 1793 among the papers of a suspected person, was made one of the charges against Mlle. Contat, when, in September of that year, she was arrested, with nearly all the members of the Comédie-Française, but, thanks to the courage of Labussière, she escaped the guillotine.<sup>1</sup>

On her release from Sainte-Pélagie, Mlle. Contat returned to the Comédie-Française, now called the Théâtre de l'Égalité, from which, in June 1795, she migrated, with her colleagues, to the Théâtre-Feydeau. After the bankruptcy of Sageret and the dispersal of the company he had formed, she accepted an engagement at the Bordeaux theatre, whither Fleury accompanied her. Here she not only acted, but frequently took part in *opéra-comique*, and, having an agreeable and well-trained voice, greatly delighted her audiences. The enthusiasm of the Bordelais, both inside and outside the theatre, reached such a pitch as to become positively dangerous for its object. Crowds gathered at the stage door to witness her departure at the end of a performance. They surrounded her, and followed her with such

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 182 *et seq.*, *supra*.

transports of delight that, at once flattered and alarmed, she would press close to Fleury's side and say, with an air of comic gravity: "My friend, these people enchant me. Had we not better call the guard?"

On the reconstitution of the Comédie-Française, in May 1799, Mlle. Contat resumed her place in the company, and speedily regained all her old popularity. Under the Directory and Consulate, indeed, she was more than ever adored by the public and particularly by the youth of the capital, "who, in their anxiety to applaud her, forgot to pay their tailors' bills."

In these later years, Mlle. Contat, having become too "majestic" for the Elmires and Célimènes, had been compelled to abandon the *emploi* in which she was still without a rival, to play young matrons. If she had been admirable in her former répertoire, in her new rôles she is said to have been absolutely inimitable, and, as Madame de Volmar, in the *Mariage secret*, Julie, in the *Dissipateur*, and Madame Evrard, in the *Vieux Célibataire*, to have reached the very perfection of her art.

The irregularities of Mlle. Contat's youth, and the fact that she had a daughter and two sons—the paternity of at least one of whom seems to have been very much a matter of opinion—to remind the world of her lapses from the path of rectitude, did not deprive her of the friendship and esteem of many whose friendship and esteem were worth possessing. That this should have been the case was due to two reasons: first, to the fact that she had always been careful to observe some degree of decorum in her gallantries and to cause herself to be regarded rather as the victim of an excessive sensibility—a kind of Adrienne Lecouvreur, in fact—than as a lady



of easy virtue ; and, secondly, to the very high social qualities which she undoubtedly possessed—qualities in which she was surpassed by few of her contemporaries.

In truth, Louise Contat was a species of *grande dame*, whose salon partook of the appearance of the salons of former times ; one of those delightful rendezvous where the exquisite courtesy and tact of the hostess never failed to place every member of the company, from the highest to the lowest, immediately at his ease. To see the actress in the midst of her guests must have been a useful object-lesson for any lady who aspired to social popularity. “With what art she knew how to talk to some the language of the Court of Marie Antoinette, to the generals of their victories, to the orators, to the financiers, of their ambitions or their affairs ; to salute a marquis of thirty-six quarterings with a sweeping courtesy, to carve an epigram, to improvise a quatrain, to analyse a play ! . . . So many qualities attracted, conquered, and retained the most rebellious.”<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Contat’s early education had been somewhat neglected, but she had contrived to atone for its deficiencies by reading and conversation, and by “that precious faculty of assimilation, of transforming in the crucible of an original nature the knowledge and the talent of others into her own.” Her conversation was always charming and witty, though her wit was untinged by malice—“the irony of Voltaire tempered by feminine sweetness.” On occasion, however, she could be very severe upon those who blasphemed her idol—good taste. One day, a hunchbacked duke, a well-meaning, but somewhat maladroit person, was ill-advised enough

<sup>1</sup> M. Victor du Bled, *Les Comédiens français pendant la Révolution*, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. cxxiv.

to remind her of the days, now alas ! long past, when she had possessed the most exquisite figure in Paris. Mlle. Contat, though furious at the pleasantry, dissembled her indignation, but bided her time ; and when, the conversation happening to turn upon hunchbacked people, the duke observed that Nature, by way of compensation, almost invariably endowed those so afflicted with intelligence of an unusually high order, exclaimed : “ *Ah ! Monsieur le Duc, vous n’êtes que contrefait !* ”

Yet she was quite incapable of bearing malice, and more than once gave proof of rare magnanimity. Placed under surveillance in her country-house at Ivry during the Terror, she saved the life of one of her persecutors, who, proscribed in his turn, threw himself upon her compassion. For some days, she concealed him in her room, bringing him his food with her own hands. Then, learning that search-parties were scouring the neighbourhood, and that it was no longer safe for him to remain, she took the gardener’s wife into her confidence, dressed herself in the woman’s clothes, disguised her guest as the gardener’s boy, and drove him in a cart laden with vegetables and milk to Choisy-le-Roi, whence he was able to make his escape to Villeneuve-Saint-George and the Forest of Senart.

“ Men of letters and actresses,” remarks M. du Bled, “ have always possessed an attraction for one another ; interest, end, character, all create between them affinities which result in gallantry, in friendship, and in love ; the former invent, the latter execute ; glory, gain, success, and failure are their common lot ; common also the place of triumph, the judge who awards the palm and the hisses.”<sup>1</sup> Mlle. Contat had many friends in the

<sup>1</sup> M. Victor du Bled, *Les Comédiens français pendant la Révolution*, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, vol. cxxiv.

Republic of Letters, and her salon was one of the most brilliant literary resorts in Paris. Thither came Vigée, author of the successful comedies, *Les Aveux difficiles*, *La Fausse Coquette*, and *L'Entrevue*; Desfaucherets, the improviser of proverbs, whose play *Le Mariage secret* was ascribed by the sycophantic courtiers of the Restoration to Louis XVIII., just as they ascribed to him Arnault's *Marius à Miturnes* and Lemierre's pretty quatrain for a fan :

“ Dans les temps de chaleurs extrêmes  
Hereux d'amuser vos loisirs,  
Je saurai près de vous amener les Zéphirs,  
Les Amours y viendront d'eux-mêmes.”

—Maisonnette, the author of *Roxelane et Mustapha*; Arnault, whose once applauded tragedies have long since been forgotten, but whose *Souvenirs* are still read with pleasure, one of the intimate friends of Bonaparte during the Directory and a confidant of the *coup d'État* of the 18th Brumaire; and, finally, Lemerrier, one of the most original figures of his time—Lemerrier, with his half-paralysed body and brilliant wit<sup>1</sup> and feverish energy, perpetually indulging in the wildest pranks and attempting with equal ardour every branch of literature : poems, plays, fiction, and philosophy ; a courageous and honest

<sup>1</sup> Many amusing anecdotes are told of Lemerrier's wit. Here is one, which Ernest Legouvé relates in his *Soixante ans de souvenirs* : “ One evening, he (Lemerrier) was seated on a low stool in the gangway of the first gallery of the Théâtre-Français. Enter a young officer, making a great deal of noise, slamming the door violently behind him, and taking his stand right in front of M. Lemerrier. ‘ Monsieur,’ says the poet, very gently, ‘ you prevent my seeing anything.’ The officer turns round and, staring from his towering height at the little, inoffensive-looking civilian, humbly seated on his low stool, resumes his former position. ‘ Monsieur,” repeats M. Lemerrier, more emphatically, ‘ I have told you that you prevent me from



man, too, who declined to bow the knee to Napoleon and saw, in consequence, his works—his chief source of income—spitefully interdicted by the Imperial censors, and the doors of the Academy closed against him.

Under the Empire, the reputation of Mlle. Contat rose, if possible, still higher. Napoleon greatly admired her acting, and she frequently played the leading parts in the theatrical troupe which followed his victorious armies and gave performances in the towns which he had conquered.

On January 26, 1809, Mlle. Contat married Paul Marie Claude de Forges Parny, a retired captain of cavalry, brother—and not nephew, as Gaboriau and several writers state—of the poet, Evarest Désiré Parny.

A few weeks later, yielding to the solicitations of her friends, she decided to retire from the stage, after a career of thirty-four years. It is believed that the attacks made upon her by the critic Geoffroy were not altogether unconnected with this determination. Her last appearance was on March 6, 1809, as the tavern-hostess in *Les Deux Pages*, on which occasion the whole of the takings were devoted to her benefit. The bill that evening was a triple one. First, Ducis's adaptation of *Othello*<sup>1</sup> was

seeing the stage, and I command you to get out of the way.' 'You command!' retorts his interlocutor, in a tone of contempt; 'do you know to whom you are speaking? You are speaking to a man who brought back the standards from the army of Italy!' 'That is very possible, Monsieur, seeing that it was an ass which carried Christ!' As a matter of course, there was a duel, and the officer had his arm broken by a bullet."

<sup>1</sup> Ducis's adaptation—or distortion—of *Othello*, first produced on November 26, 1772, differed materially from the original play. "Iago's villainy," says Mr. Hawkins, in his "French Stage in the Eighteenth Century," "was thought too deep and patent, especially for a Parisian audience. Pesare, as the ancient is called here, is accordingly transformed into something like an ordinary confidant, to all appearance full of sincere *bombom*ie,

presented, with Talma as the Moor. Then came *Les Deux Pages*; and the entertainment concluded with a grand ballet composed by Gardel, for which all the leading performers of the Opera gave their services. The Emperor and Empress assisted at the representation, which, says the *Journal de Paris*, was "one of the most brilliant that had taken place at the Théâtre-Français for thirty years." "The prices," continues the same journal, "were more than tripled, but, to judge by the eagerness with which the ticket-offices were besieged, one may believe that, even if they had been *quintupled*, it would not have prevented the theatre from being filled. Mlle. Contat was several times called before the curtain; and all the spectators were unanimous in demanding her reappearance after the performance, which did not conclude until a very late hour."<sup>1</sup>

After her marriage, Mlle. Contat sold her country-house at Ivry, where she had for many years past spent a good deal of her time, and took up her residence permanently in Paris, where her house became the resort of some of the most agreeable society in the capital, for, as we have seen, she was no less brilliant in private life than on the stage. Unhappily, she did not live long to enjoy her well-earned leisure. She was already suffering from that terrible disease, cancer, and she soon learned—by an accident—that her doom was sealed. "She

and with his devilish purpose hidden until he has been seen for the last time. Ducis, it has been well remarked, was extremely afraid of arousing too much emotion among his auditors. Another essential difference lay in Cassio being really in love with Desdemona (re-named Hédelmone)." Changes of minor importance were the substitution of a letter for the handkerchief, and a poniard for the pillow. Ducis also adapted—or distorted—*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Paris*, March 7, 1809

had been for some time suffering from violent pain in her breast," says Fleury. "Her medical attendant, alarmed by her increasing illness, recommended her to consult the celebrated Dubois,<sup>1</sup> which she accordingly did. After some conversation with her, Dubois said: 'Madame, I will prescribe a course of treatment for you, which you must scrupulously follow. Call on me again in about three days' time, and, in the meanwhile, I will see your doctor.' On the appointed day, Contat repeated her visit to Dubois. He received her in his private cabinet and, after a little conversation, he left the room, saying he should be with her again in a few moments. Casting her eyes on the doctor's writing-table, near which she was seated, Contat saw her own name written on a slip of paper. It was merely a medical prescription and, after glancing at it, she laid it down again. But beside it lay a sheet of paper concealed, on which Contat also saw her name written. Unfortunately, she took it up and read it. It was a letter which Dubois had been writing to her doctor. The first few lines over which she cast her eye declared that the patient was doomed, and that it would be useless to subject her to a painful operation, which could not possibly save her. Contat fainted. Dubois, on his return, perceived that she had perused the fatal paper. He bitterly reproached himself with having caused, though innocently, a state of mental despondency calculated to hurry the patient to the grave more speedily even than the disease itself, certain as was its fatal termination. The kind-hearted man paid her

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Dubois (1756-1837), the leading obstetric surgeon of the time. He assisted at the accouchement of the Empress Marie Louise, and was made a baron of the Empire. His son, Paul Dubois, was also a celebrated accoucheur, and the author of several able works on obstetrics.



the most assiduous attention and sought to cheer her by a faint ray of hope. But in vain ; the blow had been struck.

“Contat, however, behaved with no want of fortitude. At the first shock, she was naturally staggered. She afterwards became almost indifferent to her situation. Her mind was cheerful, and she retained her grace and good-humour to the last. When in the midst of her family and friends, she successfully concealed her pain and anxiety. In this manner, she lived two years from the time she so strangely gained the knowledge of her real condition ; and it was only within a fortnight before her death that she began to complain. Thus died (March 9, 1813) one of the most brilliant actresses of which the French stage has ever been able to boast.”

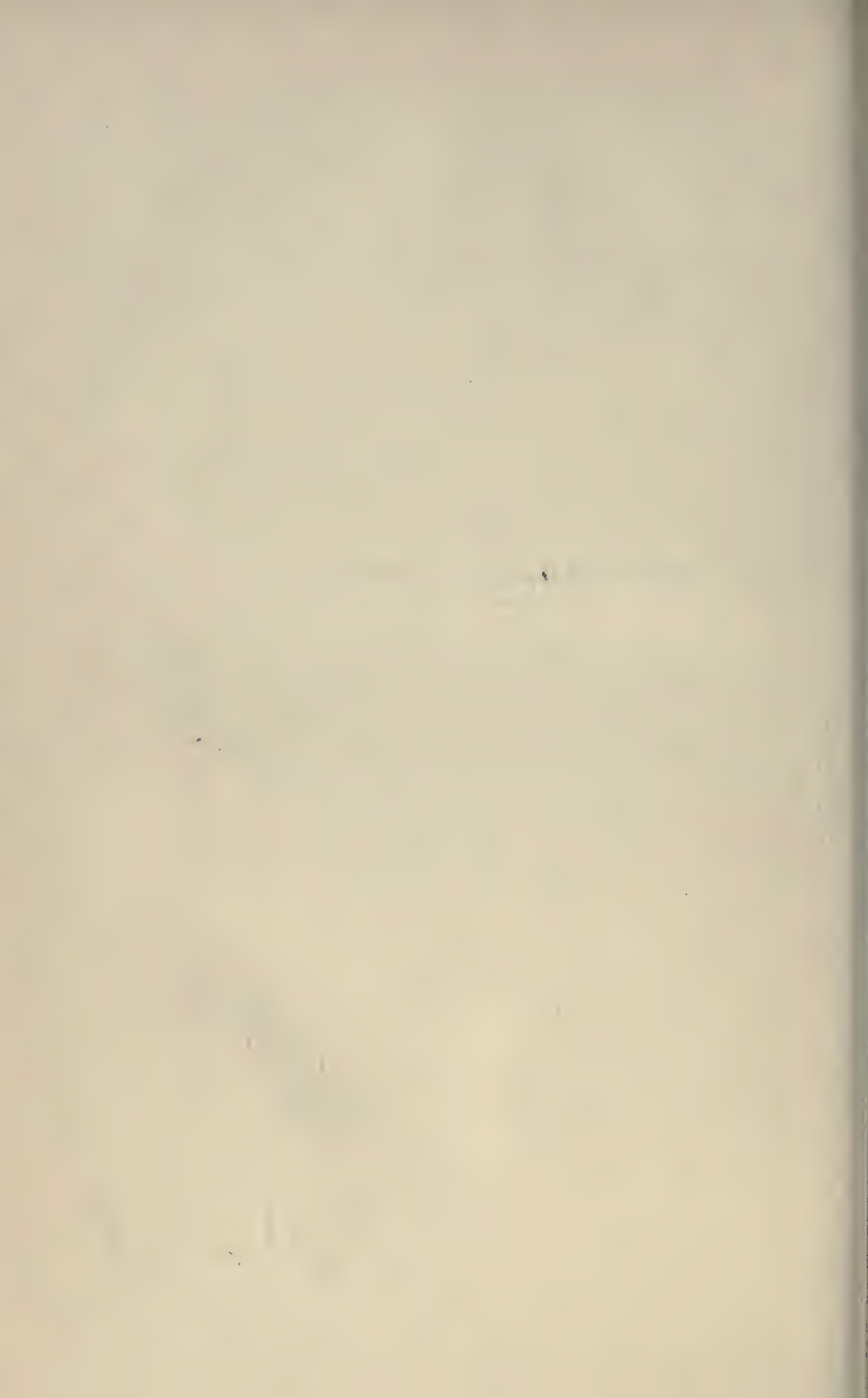
Amalie Contat, Mlle. Contat's daughter, presumably by the Comte d'Artois, adopted her mother's profession and made her *début*, in 1805, as Dorine in *Tartuffe*, and the soubrette, in *Le Cercle*, with immense success. Unfortunately, the great hopes then formed of her were very far from being fulfilled ; and when, three years later, she retired from the stage, in order to make a rich marriage, she ranked as an actress of only moderate ability.



VI

MADAME SAINT-HUBERTY





## VI

### MADAME SAINT-HUBERTY

ON a certain afternoon, early in September 1777, a rehearsal of Gluck's *Armide* was about to begin at the Opera. The stage was crowded with the artistes of both sexes, their friends and their admirers, for, as we have said elsewhere, in those days it was the fashion to attend the rehearsals of any new opera or play which happened to be arousing unusual interest, and the fame of the little German composer was at its height.

It was a brilliant assembly; youth, beauty, talent, rank, and wealth were all represented there. The women especially were in full force, the queens of song and the stars of the dance: Duranceray, Beaumesnil, Sophie Arnould, Rosalie Levasseur, Laguerre, Heinel, Guimard, Peslin, Allard, Théodore, and a bevy of minor divinities, the demoiselles of the ballet and the ladies of the chorus, many of whose names, though unknown to dramatic fame, were already writ large in the annals of gallantry: the two Lilys, the blonde and the brunette; Lolotte, who had the finest horses in Paris; Droma, whose extravagance had so completely ruined a rich merchant of the Rue Saint-Honoré that nothing was left for the unfortunate man but to hang himself, and Rosette, for whose favours two abbés had recently fought.

A brilliant assembly and a bravely-dressed one too;

for even the *figurante* drawing her eight hundred or a thousand livres a year seemed to find no difficulty in patronising the establishments of M. Pagelle, of *Les Traits Galants*, or M. Bertin, of the *Grand Mogol*. There was, however, an exception. In a remote corner sat a young woman alone, whose pale, drawn face bore the marks of cruel struggles and long suffering, and whose simple, black gown, patched in more than one place, afforded a striking contrast to the gorgeous toilettes around her. No one spoke to her, no one heeded her; the gay throng was too much occupied with its own affairs to have a thought to bestow on so insignificant a person, until a movement on her part happened to arrest the attention of a gorgeously-attired damsel, who, with a mocking smile, exclaimed: "*Ab, tiens! voilà Madame La Ressource.*"<sup>1</sup>

At these words, Gluck, who was talking with the conductor of the orchestra, abruptly terminated his conversation, and, turning round, exclaimed, in a voice which could be heard by all: "You have well named her Madame La Ressource, for one day she will be the resource of the Opera!"

This speech would appear to have been nothing more than a jest on the part of the composer; since never could he have even suspected, at that time, how fully his prediction was to be verified; never could he have foreseen the astonishing triumphs which awaited this humble *coryphée*, still confined to the rôles of confidante and secondary divinity. For the young woman, "thus derided by vice, thus defended by genius," was none other than Anne Antoinette Cécile Clavel, known to fame as Madame Saint-Huberty!

<sup>1</sup> A character in the *Joueur* of Regnard.



The life of Antoinette Clavel had been a peculiarly sad one; one long course of privation, misfortunes, disappointments, and disillusion. Born at Strasburg, on December 15, 1756, she was now in her twenty-first year. Her father, a musician, formerly a member of a French troupe in the service of the Elector Palatine, and, at the time of Antoinette's birth, attached to the Strasburg theatre, had commenced his little daughter's musical education before she was well out of the nursery. The child, like Sophie Arnould, early gave promise of exceptional talent. At the age of twelve, she sang to her own harpsichord accompaniment, "with so much taste and sweetness that she excited the admiration of all who heard her." The fame of her precocious talent quickly spread abroad, and the managers of several foreign and provincial theatres offered her engagements. But her father and mother, "cherishing in her the germ of those virtues with which they had inspired her, had no mind to deliver her youth into distant towns, to the danger of seduction by those amiable and opulent men who delight in the criminal victories they achieve over innocence," refused to allow her to appear, except at the Strasburg theatre, where "they were able to direct at its outset a career so slippery for a young and inexperienced girl."

Here she had the good fortune to attract the attention of the leader of the orchestra, Lemoine, a French composer who was later to achieve success in Paris. Lemoine, a kind-hearted and excellent man, gave the girl lessons and allotted her a part in a little piece of his own, *Le Bouquet de Colinette*. Never was there a more grateful pupil. In after years, Madame Saint-Huberty made the most heroic efforts to assure the success of

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the somewhat mediocre works of her first professor, of whose kindness to her when she was a child she could never speak without tears in her eyes.

"I used to go to his house in the morning," she related to one of her friends. "As it was cold and he was not well off, he remained in bed until the morning rehearsal, in order to save wood. When I arrived to take my lesson, I used to find him rolled up in his blankets, with a great woollen night-cap on his head, which reached to his eyes. 'Ah! there you are, little one,' he would say to me, and would throw me one of the blankets, in which I wrapped myself as well as I could. Then I used to sing, beating time with my feet with all my strength, in order to keep them warm.

"In the evening, I accompanied my father to the theatre. Often I was a *figurante*, and Lemoine, who knew that we made but poor cheer at home, always contrived to give me some tit-bits, off which I might make a good supper.

"My father was indebted to him for several pupils, who paid him fairly well. Finally, he presented us to Count Branicki, an immensely wealthy nobleman, at whose house plays were frequently performed."<sup>1</sup>

Antoinette Clavel had been engaged two or three years at the Strasburg theatre when there arrived in the city a man who described himself as director-general of the "Menus-Plaisirs" of the King of Prussia, and stated that the object of his visit was to seek for fresh talent for the French troupe at Berlin. In his presumed official capacity, he had no difficulty in procuring admission to the *coulisses* of the theatre, where he soon became on terms of friendly intimacy with the actors and actresses,

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 207.

and with Antoinette in particular. Claude Croisilles de Saint-Huberty, for by that high-sounding name was the gentleman known, was still young, but had seen much of the world, of good appearance, and a fluent talker, whose honeyed words were well calculated to excite the imagination of inexperienced women, for whom he had all the attraction of the successful adventurer.

He made such magnificent promises to Antoinette, and held out to her the hope of such a brilliant career, that, one fine day, in the spring of 1775, the young girl resolved to leave her parents secretly and follow M. Croisilles de Saint-Huberty to Berlin. Here disillusion awaited her. The pretended director of the "Menus-Plaisirs" of the King of Prussia proved to be merely the stage-manager of the French troupe, who could only very partially carry out the conditions of the engagement which had induced Mlle. Clavel to quit the paternal roof.

Whether Antoinette was Saint-Huberty's mistress, or only, as she herself asserted, an ambitious young artiste decoyed away by the promise of an advantageous engagement is uncertain. But, however that may be, Saint-Huberty was exceedingly anxious to become her husband; nor is his motive difficult to understand. So far from having any right to the aristocratic patronymic he bore, he was the son of a merchant at Metz, named simply Croisilles, and had left home in order to gratify a passion for the stage. A needy and unscrupulous adventurer, he foresaw for the young singer a successful, and possibly a brilliant, career, upon the emoluments of which he might levy toll; while if, by chance, her success was not in accordance with his expectations, he would always be able to obtain the annulment of a marriage contracted



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in a foreign country and without the consent of the parents of either party. And so from morning until night he importuned Antoinette to marry him, expatiating upon the vast possessions of the house of Saint-Huberty—possessions well-nigh as boundless as his love for her—which, he declared, would one day be his, the brilliant future he could assure his wife, and so forth. Nor did he plead in vain. At the end of four or five months, the poor girl, alone in a foreign city, friendless, and almost penniless, had the weakness to consent; and the marriage was celebrated on September 10, 1775, in the parish of St. Hedgwig, the so-called Saint-Huberty being described as “native of France, stage-manager of the French troupe of his Majesty the King of Prussia,” and Antoinette as “Jungfrau Maria Antonia, native of Strasburg, actress.”<sup>1</sup>

The young bride was very speedily enlightened as to her husband's real character and the motives which had led him to make her his wife. “The third night of our marriage,” she says, in a memoir which she subsequently drew up for an annulment of the union, “was marked by the grossest language on the part of the sieur Croisilles, accompanied by a pair of sound boxes on the ear, because the counterpane was more on my side than his.” And, a few weeks later, Saint-Huberty secretly quitted Berlin, carrying off everything of value that his wife possessed.

From Berlin, whence the too-pressing attentions of his creditors had been the cause of his abrupt departure, M. Saint-Huberty made his way to Warsaw, from which city he presently wrote to his wife, informing her that

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty, d'après sa correspondance et ses papiers de famille*, p. 12.

he had just formed an operatic company, whose first performance had been warmly applauded at the Polish Court, and that her assistance alone was wanting to make it worthy to perform before the sovereigns of the North.

The rascal's pen must have been as persuasive as his tongue, since Antoinette at once decided to rejoin her husband. She arrived at Warsaw, only to find that the company which was supposed to have already achieved such great things had, as a matter of fact, never given anything but rehearsals. Finally, however, it gave its first performance in public and, thanks to the efforts of the young singer, appears to have made a very favourable impression.

Intoxicated with his success, Saint-Huberty determined to extend the scope of his operations and establish his troupe on a permanent basis. With this end in view, he started for Hamburg, "in search of suitable recruits," after which he had the imprudence to visit Berlin. It was to venture into the lion's den. Scarcely had he set foot in the town, than he was recognised, arrested, and thrown into prison, where his creditors announced their intention of keeping him until he should have paid the uttermost pfenning.

The troupe which he had left at Warsaw, deprived of its director and its salaries, for we may presume that M. Saint-Huberty had taken most of its available cash with him, found itself in a parlous condition. In the meantime, however, Antoinette had scored a great personal triumph in the opera of *Zémire et Azor*, when the reception she met with must have exceeded her fondest anticipations. Warsaw, in those days, was essentially a city of pleasure; and its upper classes prided themselves on following the manners and modes of Paris. The

Opera was especially high in favour, and, as the public was not very discriminating and lavishly generous to those who earned its approbation, artistes of very mediocre talent, who in Paris would have been accounted fortunate to be received in nothing worse than silence, found themselves lauded to the skies and loaded with gifts. The enthusiasm evoked by Madame Saint-Huberty's singing found vent in numerous valuable presents being made to the artiste, who was thus enabled to realise a sum of 12,000 livres, wherewith she proceeded to release her worthless husband from his Prussian dungeon. That gentleman, accordingly, returned to Warsaw; but his creditors in the Polish capital, encouraged by the success which had attended the proceedings of their fellow victims in Berlin, assumed so threatening an attitude that, after a brief period of repose, he judged it expedient to resume his travels, and, one fine night, suddenly disappeared.

According to his custom, M. Saint-Huberty did not depart with empty hands. This time he had carried off not only all his wife's ready money, but even the contents of her wardrobe, including the costumes which she wore upon the stage, leaving her without resources and almost without clothes. Happily, a wealthy and generous Polish lady, the Princess Lubomirska, took compassion upon the unfortunate actress, refurnished her wardrobe, and gave her shelter for three months in her own palace.

Soon, however, difficulties arose with her husband's numerous creditors, who endeavoured to fix upon her the responsibility for the debts which the fugitive impresario had contracted; and, in order to free herself from all responsibility in connection with his liabilities, Madame



Saint-Huberty was obliged to obtain from the authorities at Warsaw a formal separation, in regard to property. And here is the declaration which she made on this occasion, bearing date March 17, 1777 :

“ Before the notaries and public officers of the ancient town of Warsaw, appearing in person, the noble dame Antoinette de Clavel, wife of the nobleman Philippe de Saint-Huberty, assisted for the present deed by the counsel of the nobleman Georges Godin, present and called by her to this effect : The said Antoinette de Clavel, being of sound mind and body, of her own full accord has freely and expressly declared and does declare by the present act : that having learned that the nobleman Philippe de Saint-Huberty, her husband, had quitted Warsaw, on account of the great number of debts by which he was overwhelmed, and being ignorant even of the place to which he had retired, and unwilling to be bound in any manner by the debts of her husband, which he had contracted without any participation on her part, she separates herself from all the goods and property generally of her said husband, excepting, nevertheless, the goods which she has acquired and brought with her ; and the said dame de Clavel declares, moreover, by a formal declaration, that she makes no claim whatever to the said property, and approving entirely of the present separation from the goods of her husband, she has signed the present deed with her own hand.—Antoinette de Clavel, by marriage Saint-Huberty, J. Godin, as witness.”<sup>1</sup>

In the meanwhile, the “ nobleman ” referred to in the foregoing document had settled in Vienna, from

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty, d'après sa correspondance et ses papiers de famille*, p. 14.

which city he wrote to his wife, to inform her that he had arranged to open an opera-house, which he was confident would be the means of assuring him an ample fortune, and to urge her to join him without delay. As may be supposed, after her sad experiences, the poor lady was inclined to regard these assurances with some suspicion; and, on the advice of the Princess Lubomirska, she, for some time, declined to leave Warsaw. But Saint-Huberty pleaded so eloquently in the letters which he continued to send her that ultimately she relented, and, in spite of the remonstrances of her kind-hearted patroness, took the road to Vienna.

Here she quickly found that the opera-house and the brilliant prospects had no existence, save in the imagination of M. Saint-Huberty, who was reduced to such straits as to be actually in want of bread, and had only sent for his wife in order to save himself from starvation. Happily, almost so soon as she arrived, circumstances compelled the impresario to quit Vienna in the same manner as he had quitted Berlin and Warsaw.

The young singer now found herself without an engagement, and free to go wherever she might choose. Like almost every operatic artiste, her thoughts had often turned towards the Académie Royale de Musique, where Gluck was now supreme, and she, accordingly, solicited an *ordre de début*. This was easily obtained, the Opera being just at that time sorely in need of fresh talent to fittingly interpret the master's works, and, in April 1777, she set out for Paris. Arrived in the French capital, she lost no time in obtaining an introduction to the great composer, who, quick to recognise ability wherever he found it, promised to give her lessons him-

self,<sup>1</sup> and recommended her for a part in his forthcoming opera.

On September 23, 1777, Madame Saint-Huberty made her *début* in the small part of Mélisse, in *Armide*, and the *Mercure de France* referred to her performance in the following terms :

“ She has an agreeable voice. She sings and acts with much delicacy of expression. She appears to be an excellent musician, and needs only a little stage experience in order to acquire greater development for her voice and greater ease for her acting.”

In spite of this encouraging notice,<sup>2</sup> the newcomer appears to have attracted but little attention, in the midst of an event of such importance as a new work by Gluck. Who, after all, was this modest *débutante*, beside such stars as Legros, Larrivée, Gélín, Rosalie Levasseur, and Mlle. Duranceray ?

On first arriving in Paris, Madame Saint-Huberty

<sup>1</sup> If one is to believe a little brochure of the time, bearing the title of *Chronique scandaleuse des théâtres, ou Aventures des plus célèbres actrices, chanteuses, danseuses, et figurantes*, the lessons given by Gluck to Madame Saint-Huberty were not entirely gratuitous. “ In one of those moments of incontinency to which the greatest men often yield, the celebrated Gluck recognised in her talents which had not even been suspected and which attached him to her. He resolved to make of her an actress. In like manner, the famous Champmeslé was formed by the care and counsels of Racine. However, one ought not to compare the German Orpheus to the French Euripides. Gluck sought less to teach the sentiments of which he taught her the expression, than to inspire her with the fire of his genius, and, as he had always preserved the rusticity of his German manners, he did not often fail to commit himself to it in his lessons. . . .”

<sup>2</sup> All the critics were not so kind as the scribe of the *Mercure*, and one went so far as to declare that the *débutante* was “ very ugly, very bad,” and that “ she could not possibly long retain her position on the lyric stage.”



had lodged in the Rue Sainte-Croix de la Bretonnerie, at the house of a dame Sorel, after which we find her residing successively at the Hôtel de Genève, the Hôtel de Bayonne, and the Hôtel des Treize-Provinces.<sup>1</sup> At all these places she lived alone, for, though her worthless husband had followed her to Paris, she very prudently refused to receive him back, until she was assured that he had mended his ways. As, however, he had no means of livelihood, and she could not allow him to starve, she obtained for him, through the good offices of Gluck, the post of wardrobe-keeper at the Opera, which, as one of her biographers very sensibly remarks, was scarcely a proper appointment for a gentleman with a weakness for carrying off other people's garments and raising money upon them. M. Saint-Huberty was, as a matter of fact, very speedily discharged, upon which he revenged himself by hawking about the streets and "reading aloud in the cafés and even in certain private houses to which he was admitted," a libellous pamphlet against the authorities of the Opera, composed by a confederate named Dodé de Jousserand. In order to keep himself in funds, he paid frequent visits to his unhappy wife, from whom he did not hesitate, when argument failed, to extort money by threats and even blows; while, when she had nothing to give him, he would seize upon any saleable article which happened to catch his eye, and carry it off. One day, while Madame Saint-Huberty was at the theatre, he swooped down and made a clear sweep of all the portable property of the luckless singer, who was compelled to lay a complaint against him before the commissary of police of her quarter. Here is the text of this document :

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<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 20.

“In the year seventeen hundred and seventy-eight, Friday, the thirty-first of July, at nine o'clock of the evening, in the hôtel, and before us Joseph Chesnon  *fils*, advocate to the Parliament, counsellor of the King, commissary to the Châtelet of Paris, appeared demoiselle Anne Antoinette Clavel, called Saint-Huberty, King's pensioner at the Opera, who informed us that the sieur de Saint-Huberty, who claims to be married to her, in virtue of a pretended act of celebration in Berlin, has abused the confidence of the complainant for nearly three years, in order to install himself in her abode and to remain there in spite of her ; to make himself master there, and even to maltreat her. He, nevertheless, several times left the house, but always carried away with him jewels and other property of the complainant, which he pledged and sold. He would again force his way in, but with empty hands, and the complainant was unable to do anything against such persecution, being without her papers.<sup>1</sup> Finally, this same day, while she was at the Opera, the sieur Saint-Huberty has again taken advantage of her confidence and her absence to carry off the goods, papers, and music of the complainant, including even music which belongs to the Opera.

“She finds herself in the greatest embarrassment, and the sieur Saint-Huberty is cunning enough to ask her, by a letter, dated Wednesday, the twenty-ninth of this month, for papers and goods which he has already taken the precaution to carry off. For which reasons, and in order that she may enjoy peace at home, of which

<sup>1</sup> It is not clear what papers are referred to, but, in all probability, they were those relating to the separation of her goods from those of her husband which she had obtained at Warsaw, in March 1777.

the sieur Saint-Huberty has for a long time deprived her, and to force the said Saint-Huberty to restore to her her property, papers, and music, and, in particular, that which belongs to the Opera, she has come to lodge the present plaint against the sieur Saint-Huberty, requiring from us the act which we have given her and signing the minute in our presence.”<sup>1</sup>

On an order from the Lieutenant of Police, a portion of the stolen property was subsequently restored ; but if Madame Saint-Huberty flattered herself that she was safe from further depredations, she was speedily undeceived. On August 10, she removed to a little apartment in the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, in the house of Gourdan, one of the King's *valets-de-chambre*, for which she paid a rental of 490 livres and had furnished herself. Three weeks later, at seven o'clock in the morning, she was sleeping peacefully, dreaming perhaps of the time not far distant when all the musical world would be at her feet, when she was abruptly awakened by the entrance of four men, amongst whom she at once recognised the scoundrelly Saint-Huberty. That worthy, pointing to a person attired in the black garb of a commissary of police, to indicate that he had legal authority for what he was about to do, cried : “ The pockets, Messieurs ; search her pockets.” The hapless woman was then dragged from her bed, and, while the man in black held her in his arms, her husband showered blows upon her, after which he took a pair of scissors and cut the ribands of the pockets of her night-dress, inflicting several severe scratches in the process. Next, having possessed

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Campardon, *L'Académie royale de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* : Article, “Saint-Huberty.”



himself of her keys, he opened all the drawers and cupboards in the apartment, and proceeded to ransack them, at the same time addressing to his wife the most shocking language. Finally, a fifth person, also clad in black, entered, who announced himself as the procurator of the husband, but, like his fellows, only laughed at the poor actress's distress, and declined to answer when she demanded to see his authority. When her husband and his confederates had taken their departure, Madame Saint-Huberty found that she had been robbed of a packet of twenty-two letters, "which, at first sight, appeared to be love-letters," and a pair of diamond shoe-buckles of the value of six louis.

This outrage was, of course, made the subject of a complaint by its victim, of which the foregoing account is a summary. But, as Saint-Huberty had really had legal authority for his proceedings, having had the audacity to declare to the police that his wife had "secretly quitted their common abode and carried away with her numerous effects belonging to him," no steps could be taken against him. When, however, Madame Saint-Huberty threatened to retire from the Opera, "unless her personal safety were guaranteed," she received an assurance that she need no longer fear the visits and assaults of her husband.

But, if the unhappy woman had contrived to secure herself against personal molestation, she was not yet free from trouble of another kind. Some weeks before the adventure which we have just related, she had succeeded in obtaining from Saint-Huberty, in return, we may be sure, for some pecuniary consideration, a formal renunciation of all claim to her professional earnings, whether derived from the Opera or from

engagements at private concerts or other entertainments. By the law, however, she still remained answerable for his debts, and the cunning scoundrel now determined to obtain the money he required through the claims of fictitious creditors. On the demand of a certain demoiselle Guérin, who declared herself to be a creditor for the sum of 489 francs against the sieur Saint-Huberty and his wife, a formal objection was lodged to the payment of the dame Saint-Huberty's salary; and, on October 2, 1778, the Châtelet declared this opposition good and valid, and made an order for the directors and treasurers of the Opera to deliver over to the sieur Saint-Huberty all sums due to his wife, until the debt should be liquidated.

Poor Madame Saint-Huberty was in despair. It was in vain that she protested that she knew nothing of the demoiselle Guérin, and had never been called upon by her, previous to the legal proceedings, to pay any debt. The officials of the Opera assured her that they were powerless in the matter. Deeply as they sympathised with her, they could pay her nothing, until she had obtained a recession of the order of the court.

This she, accordingly, endeavoured to procure. But the machinery of the law worked even more slowly in those days than at the present time, and it was not until March 19, 1779, that the appeal came on for hearing before the Parliament of Paris. Then, at last, Fortune declared itself on her side; for the judges, carried away apparently by the eloquence of the plaintiff's advocate, Maître Mascassies, who, in a speech of several hours' duration, traced the history of the stage from its origin to the middle of the eighteenth century, with special reference to the influence of the fall of Constantinople

on the "Mysteries," and the relative merits of the operas of Lulli and Rameau, reversed the decision of the Châtelet, ordered the authorities of the Opera to hand over to the singer her arrears of salary, and condemned Saint-Huberty and his confederates to pay all the costs of the proceedings.

Madame Saint-Huberty followed up this victory by another and more important one. Six months later, she instituted proceedings for a formal dissolution of her marriage on the following grounds :

(1) Omission of the publication of the banns in the parish of the father and mother of the bride.

(2) Absence of the curé of the bride's parish.

(3) The fact that the marriage had been performed without the consent of the bride's parents.

(4) Rape and seduction, which, without the employment of force, but merely "*par mauvaises voyes et mauvaises artifices*," were held to be sufficient to invalidate a marriage.

The action was supported by Saint-Huberty's father, the Metz merchant, an honest man, who appears to have been genuinely distressed by the misery which his son had brought upon this unfortunate girl; and, the husband himself having been induced to leave the matter to "the wisdom of the court," on January 30, 1781, the marriage was finally annulled.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, undeterred by her domestic troubles—troubles which might well have ruined the career of a less resolute and less courageous woman—Madame Saint-Huberty had been steadily working her way into

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 42.



the very front rank of her profession. Without friends, without a protector, but proud in her distress and sustained by an all-devouring ambition, she lived alone in her humble lodging, which she never left, save to go to the theatre for rehearsals and performances. "From morning till night she worked, studied, practised unceasingly. In time, her voice became more supple and perfectly under her control. She taught herself to move her long, thin arms with grace; she accustomed her countenance to reflect her passionate sensibility, to render her lively impressions. Finally, she got rid of her deplorable Alsatian accent."<sup>1</sup>

Recognition, however, was slow to come. In 1778, the *Mercure* only mentions her as singing in unimportant parts in three or four operas, although she appears to have greatly pleased the musical critic of that journal by her rendering of an Italian arietta of Gluck, at a "*concert spirituel*," in December. During the whole of the following year, when the theatre was under the direction of Devismes, there is no reference to her whatever, except in a letter of Devismes's successor, Dauvergne, in which he speaks of the young singer as weeping with despair, because she had not been allotted a part; and she seems, about this time, to have had serious thoughts of leaving the Opera altogether.<sup>2</sup> However, her perseverance was not wasted, for, towards the end of that year, she was received as a permanent member of the company, though less, it is believed, on account of her talent, than her willingness to do whatever was required of her. This was a great step gained, and, at length, in November 1780, she reaped the reward of

<sup>1</sup> Émile Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 45.

all her labours and self-denial by being entrusted with the part of Angélique in the *Roland* (*Orlando*) of Piccini.

No one seems to have expected this opera to succeed. The composer himself believed its failure inevitable. The evening of the first representation, when he was about to start for the theatre, his family refused to accompany him, and, aware of his extremely sensitive nature used every persuasion to induce him to remain at home. His wife, his children, his friends were in tears. "One would have imagined that he was on his way to the scaffold."

Piccini endeavoured to reassure them. "My children," said he, "we are not in the midst of barbarians, but of the politest people in the world. If they do not approve of me as a musician, they will at least respect me as a man and a foreigner." And he tore himself away.

A delightful surprise awaited him. *Roland*, so far from being a failure, was an unqualified triumph, and, at the conclusion of the performance, Piccini was escorted home by an enthusiastic crowd of admirers. This happy result was undoubtedly due, in the first instance, to Madame Saint-Huberty's admirable rendering of the part of Angélique. "Where is Saint-Huberty? where is she?" cried the grateful composer, as the curtain fell to the accompaniment of round upon round of applause. "I wish to see her, to embrace her, to thank her, to tell her that I owe to her my success!"

The critic of the *Mercure* expresses himself as follows on the acting and singing of Madame Saint-Huberty in this her first important part:

"Having spoken of *Roland*, we shall seize this opportunity to say something of Madame Saint-Huberty,

whose progress, every day more marked, merits a special mention. We have seen her with pleasure in the rôle of Angélique, in which she has, in many respects, acquitted herself very well. We invite her only to be careful of her articulation; she neglects it so far as to cause us to lose part of what she says. The fault is common to foreign singers or to those trained abroad."

And the critic concludes by recommending her to be less prodigal of her gestures and not to raise her arms higher than was necessary.<sup>1</sup>

A month later, the singer gained another success, as Lise, in *Le Seigneur bienfaisant*, an indifferent work by Rochon de Chabannes and Floquet, when she rendered with such fiery energy the despair of the heroine that she fell ill from excess of emotion and was absent from the theatre for several weeks.

On her return, fresh triumphs awaited her. After successfully impersonating Églé, in the *Thésée* of Quinault, which had been set to music by Gossec, she replaced Rosalie Levasseur in the name-part in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (March 10, 1782),<sup>2</sup> in which, the *Mercure* declares that "she acquitted herself very well and deserved the praise which she received." Next, she created the rôle of Laurette, in *l'Inconnue persécutée*, "with as much taste as intelligence," and made an heroic, though unsuccessful, attempt to secure a favourable reception for

<sup>1</sup> This multiplicity and exaggeration of gestures appears to have been Madame Saint-Huberty's principal fault in the early part of her career. On another occasion, she was reproached with her resemblance to a woman "persecuted by internal convulsions."

<sup>2</sup> Rosalie Levasseur had sung charmingly on the opening night; but on the second, she was so intoxicated as to be almost incapable of struggling through the part. At the conclusion of the performance she was arrested and conveyed to For l'Évêque.



the *Électre* of her old master Lemoine, the one-time conductor of the Strasburg orchestra.

Not content with doing her utmost on the stage on her old friend's behalf, Madame Saint-Huberty employed the influence she was beginning to possess in the *coulisses* to compel the administration of the Opera to prolong the run of this very indifferent work, notwithstanding the unfavourable verdict of the public and the disastrous results such a course was likely to have upon the receipts. The administration resolved not to yield to such a preposterous demand, but, at the same time, unwilling to offend an actress who was becoming every day more necessary to them, had recourse to stratagem. They represented that they were perfectly willing to oblige Madame Saint-Huberty by continuing the representations of *Électre*; but, since the opera was not in itself a sufficient attraction to secure a full house, it would be advisable to wait for a few days, until the ever-popular ballet of *Ninette à la Cour*, in which Mlle. Guimard, it will be remembered, secured one of her greatest triumphs, could be given with it. Madame Saint-Huberty consented to the postponement, and the administration made use of the respite granted them to induce the Minister of the King's Household, the supreme authority in matters concerning the Opera, "to order that the opera of *Électre* should be absolutely withdrawn from the theatre."<sup>1</sup>

In those days, it was the fashion at the Opera to frequently present entire pieces composed of acts extracted from various works. These performances, called "*Fragments*," were very popular with the

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Madame Saint-Huberty*.

patrons of the theatre, since they constituted but little strain upon the imagination, while the variety of their subjects and music provided an agreeable change. On September 24, 1782, four "fragments" were performed at the Opera, the most important of which was a new act by Moline and Edelmann, entitled *Ariane dans l'Île de Naxos*. Madame Saint-Huberty, who played the part of Ariane, had always had a strong predilection in favour of historical accuracy in stage costume, and, on the advice of the painter Moreau, who held similar views and had designed the dresses for this opera, she resolved to make a move in the direction of reform.

"We have seen, for the first time, on the stage," says the *Journal de Paris*, "in the principal personage, the costume rigorously observed. These designs have been made on the advice of M. Moreau *le jeune*, favourably known in artistic circles by the number, the variety, and the continual beauty of his works."

Levacher de Charnois, in his work on theatrical costume, has traced a description of the costume worn by Madame Saint-Huberty on this occasion :

"One saw this actress appear habited in a long linen tunic, fastened beneath the bosom; the legs bare and fitted with the ancient buskin. From the head descended gracefully several plaits of hair, which played about her shoulders. This costume, a novel one for the spectators and both true and elegant, was applauded with a kind of frenzy. But, in spite of the approval of the public, there arrived orders which one called 'ministerial,' forbidding Madame Saint-Huberty to appear in this beautiful costume, and at the second representation of the work she was obliged to resume

the heavy and ridiculous accoutrements of our coquettes and prudes.”<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding this mortification, the actress had no reason to be dissatisfied with her performance of Ariane. It was indeed, for her, a veritable triumph. “As for Madame Saint-Huberty,” says the *Journal de Paris*, “we do not know which serves her the best, her face, her voice, or her acting; she knows how to give to each song inflections which occasion the most lively emotions.” And the musical critic of the *Mercure* writes: “Madame Saint-Huberty, in the opera of *Ariane*, has added yet further to the idea that one has always entertained of her intelligence and her talent. She played in a manner always animated and interesting, and sang with the greatest expression the music constantly loud and passionate of a long and difficult rôle.”

Guinguéne, in his notice on the life and works of Piccini, declares that Madame Saint-Huberty owed to the protection of the celebrated composer the fact that her name was not erased from the books of the Opera after her brilliant rendering of the part of Ariane, since she had shown on this occasion views too independent and a talent too original to suit the views of the authorities of that institution. “The success which she had obtained in it excited the petty passions of the *coulisses*. They were prepared to drive her from the Opera, and Piccini alone sustained her. He recalled to those who were the powers of the State the witty and sensible *mot* of Gluck; he predicted that they would speedily have need of her, and that they would be only too happy to have her. His selection of her for the

<sup>1</sup> *Recherches sur les costumes et sur les théâtres de toutes les nations*, i. 35.



interesting part of Sangarede and the superior manner in which she rendered not only the music, but the scenes as well, moved the entire public in her favour and gave her a settled position on the stage of which she was for ten years the glory.”<sup>1</sup>

The revival of *Atys* had taken place at the beginning of the year 1783, when Madame Saint-Huberty played the heroine with an enthusiasm which gave a new lease of life to that fine opera. “Thus,” says M. Jullien, “she found herself dividing her sympathies between the two hostile camps, and lending, in turn, the assistance of her great talent to the two rival composers : to Gluck, who had given her her first opportunity at the Opera, to Piccini, who had helped her to retain her position there.”<sup>2</sup>

A little time before, on November 27, 1782, the actress had given proof of a talent of rare versatility by rendering with much gaiety and charm the part of Rosette, in Grétry’s *l’Embarras des Richesses*.<sup>3</sup> This piece, notwithstanding some delightful music and Madame Saint-Huberty’s successful impersonation of the heroine, failed, mainly through the ineptitude of the libretto—the production of one Lourdet de Sans-Terre, surnamed by the wits Lourdeau Sans-Tête—which contained some of the most amazing anachronisms ever perpetrated by a presumably educated writer. Thus, the inhabitants of Athens, in the time of Pericles, are made to fast

<sup>1</sup> Ginguéné, *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Nicolas Piccini*.

<sup>2</sup> *L’Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Madame Saint-Huberty*.

<sup>3</sup> “Madame Saint-Huberty played the part of Rosette with an intelligence, a sensibility, and a fervour of expression, which proves the extent and the variety of her talent, equally well calculated to render every rôle and to sing all kinds of music.”—*Mercure de France*, December 1782.



MADAME SAINT-HUBERTY

From an engraving by COLINET after the drawing by LE MOINE





during Lent, flirt with opera-girls, and pay their debts in louis d'or; while, in the ballet, dances are executed by American savages! Bad though it was, however, *l'Embarras des Richesses* is still remembered, having been rescued from well-merited oblivion by the following amusing epigram:

“Embarras d'intérêt,  
Embarras dans les rôles,  
Embarras dans ballet,  
Embarras de paroles,  
Des embarras en sorte  
Que tout est embarras,  
Mais venez à la porte,  
Vous n'en trouverez pas.”

On February 28, 1783, Sacchini's *Renaud* was produced, with Rosalie Levasseur in the part of Armide. Her rendering of the part, however, was not considered satisfactory, and, at the fourth representation, she was replaced by Madame Saint-Huberty, who was thus enabled to set the seal upon her reputation. For where Rosalie had been found wanting, she succeeded and succeeded brilliantly, and, by her conversion of a threatened failure into a complete triumph, saved at one stroke the poor musician and the honour of the Opera, which, in cancelling its agreement with Sacchini—about which there had been some talk after the cool manner in which *Renaud* had been at first received—would have lost the composer's two masterpieces, *Dardanus* and *Œdipe à Colone*.<sup>1</sup>

Madame Saint-Huberty was not a pretty woman.

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Madame Saint-Huberty*.

She had neither the beautiful eyes nor the willowy grace of Sophie Arnould. She was short and thick-set, with long, thin arms, a large mouth and a "*nez de soubrette*"; in a word, an "ignoble figure," as the ungallant art critic of the *Mémoires secrets* calls her, in his notice of Madame Vallayer Coster's portrait of the actress, as Dido, exhibited at the Salon of 1785.

But it was quite another Madame Saint-Huberty who appeared on the boards of the Opera. "That metamorphosis, that transformation on the stage, which some actresses obtain in a fashion so marvellous, the Saint-Huberty pushed beyond the bounds of imagination, thanks to incredible labours, thanks to victories achieved every day over her unpleasing person, thanks to acquisitions apparently impossible, thanks to a remarkable intelligence, thanks to a very wide knowledge of the theatre and all its effects, thanks to a profound study of the characters she represented, whose sentiments and emotions of the soul she rendered, so to speak, 'in a palpable manner,' thanks, finally, to what her talent possessed of her heart and of the passion which dwelt in her. And she succeeded in effecting a well-nigh physical transformation; in giving to her figure nobility, elegance; in moving with gestures of pride or of touching grace. And she appeared seductive and desirable to the amorous eyes of the audience."<sup>1</sup>

The great services which Madame Saint-Huberty had already rendered to the Opera, and the wonderful talent which she had displayed in the various difficult rôles entrusted to her, made the administration keenly alive to the importance of definitely attaching to the

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 5.

theatre an artiste of such exceptional ability, whose value to them was immensely enhanced by the approaching retirement of Mlle. Laguerre and the decline of Rosalie Levasseur. During the year 1782, Madame Saint-Huberty had only received 5500 livres, a very inadequate remuneration for the attraction which she exercised over the public ; and, fully aware of her own value, she had been at no pains to conceal her dissatisfaction. On November 22, 1782, La Ferté, the Intendant des Menus, wrote to Amelot, the Minister of the King's Household, pointing out the importance of having the matter settled without delay. "She (Madame Saint-Huberty) is a very troublesome person," he says ; "but we cannot dispense with her, in view of the indifferent services and the unwillingness of the demoiselle Levasseur. All that we can hope for is that the dame Saint-Huberty will make the conditions as little onerous as possible, and I suppose there will be no hesitation in according her the Court pension of 1500 livres destined at first for the demoiselle Laguerre."

After some further correspondence on the subject, the prima donna was invited to formulate her demands. They were as follows :

- (1) 3000 livres ordinary salary.
- (2) Payment of firing, lights, and so forth.
- (3) An annual *gratification extraordinaire* of 3000 livres.
- (4) A pension of 1500 livres on the musical establishment of the King.
- (5) A *congé* of two months every year, including the Easter recess. This was, of course, to enable her to "star" in the provinces.
- (6) None of her rôles to be entrusted to any other actress, save at her own request.



La Ferté agreed readily enough to four of these proposals; indeed, the first two had already been accorded, while, as we have just seen, he himself had recommended the granting of the fourth. But he annotated the third: "To promise it when circumstances permit"; and he declared the sixth "impossible, as being contrary to the regulations."

Madame Saint-Huberty's reply was to temporarily retire from the Opera, on the plea of ill-health, and to announce that she contemplated leaving the stage altogether.

Then La Ferté submitted to Amelot an arrangement whereby the sum of 8000 livres a year was assured to the singer, independently of allowances for firing, lights, and so forth, and of a pension of 1500 livres on the musical establishment of the King, which would give her an annual income of 9500 livres. She was also to be permitted to give two private concerts every year, the expenses to be borne by the administration of the Opera. These, it was calculated, would bring her another 3000 livres. Finally, she was to be granted the *congé* she demanded, on condition that she should not take it at a time when her services were particularly necessary to the Opera or during the visit of the Court to Fontainebleau.

On February 27, 1783, the Minister wrote to Madame Saint-Huberty, to inform her of these proposals, as follows:

"Rendering to your talents and your zeal, Mademoiselle, all the justice that they deserve, I afforded myself the pleasure to give an account of them to his Majesty, who, in consequence, has willingly consented to authorise me to announce to you that he has placed

you on his musical establishment for the sum of 1500 francs, to begin from January 1, 1782, which gives you the benefit of a year in advance. Secondly, to complete by a *gratification* an annual salary of 8000 francs at the Opera ; that is to say that, supposing your place of first subject should only produce, for example, 7000 francs, then the Court would give you 1000 francs to make up the 8000 francs. You will also be accorded every year a *congé* of two months. Finally, his Majesty consents to your giving every year, if that be agreeable to you, two concerts for your own benefit. His Majesty's intention is that ' these particular favours should remain entirely secret.' I am very pleased at having been able to contribute towards securing them for you. You will kindly advise me promptly of the receipt of this letter."

To this letter Madame Saint-Huberty vouchsafed no reply ; and, after waiting until the middle of March, the Minister wrote again :

"The King inquired this morning, Mademoiselle, what reply you had made to the letter which he authorised me to write to you. His Majesty was not a little surprised when I informed him that I had not yet received it. He charges me to demand of you a positive reply as promptly as possible. I do not doubt that it will be such as the King has the right to expect."

But this letter, like the first, remained unacknowledged.

In the face of the obstinate silence of the actress, supported by public opinion, which now began to declare itself in her favour, the Minister's position became so embarrassing that La Ferté counselled him, on the occasion of a concert given at his hôtel, in which Madame Saint-Huberty was to take part, to have recourse to the

following little stratagem. He advised Amelot to speak privately to the singer before the concert began, and, in the event of his failing to obtain a satisfactory reply, all the Minister's personal friends, by previous arrangement, should demand of Madame Saint-Huberty, after she had concluded her song, whether she had definitely decided to remain at the Opera, and that Amelot should then announce that he had done everything in his power to retain her services. The luckless Intendant des Menus saw in this species of public explanation the only way of giving the lie to the report spread everywhere by the actress that she was leaving the Opera, because she found it impossible to obtain adequate remuneration.

Finally, on March 20, 1783, the Minister, the Intendant, and the administration of the Opera were forced to capitulate and to submit to all the conditions imposed by the singer, stipulating only that Madame Saint-Huberty should maintain the strictest secrecy concerning the matter, lest the jealousy of her colleagues might lead them also to demand higher salaries, and that she should engage to remain at the Opera for eight years.<sup>1</sup>

And at the bottom of the letter in which Amelot announced their surrender, the triumphant prima donna wrote as follows :

“ In conformity with the arrangements made in this letter, I engage myself to remain at the Opera for the space of eight years, to begin from the first of January, 1784.

“ (Signed) DE SAINT-HUBERTY.

*Executed this 22 March 1783.*

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 75 et seq. Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Madame Saint-Huberty*.



Eight months after her victory over the authorities of the Académie Royale de Musique, Madame Saint-Huberty reached the apogee of her fame by her impersonation of Dido, in Piccini's celebrated opera of that name.

When he had accepted the engagement which the Baron de Breteuil, the French Ambassador at Naples, had offered him, Piccini had fondly imagined that he would find a position at once honourable and tranquil. He came to Paris, and had no sooner arrived, than he perceived that those who had summoned him thither had been prompted by no other motive than that of pitting him against the composer who was then revolutionising the French lyric stage. The poor musician was naturally much troubled by this discovery, but all arrangements were concluded, and he had no option but to accept the situation.

Naturally amiable and modest, Piccini was the last man in the world to engage of his own free will in this miserable war, which would doubtless have speedily ceased, had it not been for the conduct of the philosophers and men of letters, many of whom knew scarcely anything of music and cared even less, but who, infected by the mania for disputation so prevalent in the eighteenth century, rushed into the contest with a violence as ridiculous as it was disastrous to the interests of Art, and envenomed it by their epigrams and recriminations.<sup>1</sup> That the labours of Piccini were adversely effected by the false position in which he found himself there can be little doubt, and his success, under such circumstances, is, therefore, all the more deserving of admiration.

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Madame Saint-Huberty*.

*Roland* and *Atys* had succeeded, in spite of the efforts of the Gluckists, who had combated their success by every means in their power; but *Iphigénie en Tauride* failed. The struggle was unequal: Piccini, though capable of contending with Gluck, was unable to conquer him. Mortified, discouraged, eager only for rest and tranquillity, he resolved to compose no more, but he had counted without his librettist and faithful ally, Marmontel. The Maréchal de Duras, Gentleman of the Chamber in waiting that year, had demanded of Marmontel an entirely new opera, to be played before the Court during its annual sojourn at Fontainebleau. Marmontel replied that he could promise nothing, unless Piccini would consent to collaborate with him again, and suggested that, in order to arouse the composer from the state of dejection into which he had fallen, the marshal should persuade the Queen to change the annual *gratification* which the Italian had hitherto received into a perpetual pension. And this the marshal readily promised to do.

“He asked for and obtained it,” continues Marmontel, “and when Piccini went with me to thank him: ‘It is to the Queen,’ said he, ‘that you must show your gratitude, by composing for her this year a fine opera.’”

“‘I do not ask anything better,’ said Piccini, as he left us, ‘but what opera shall it be?’”

“‘We must compose,’ said I, ‘the opera of *Didon*. I have long been revolving the plan of it. But I forewarn you that I mean to unfold my ideas at length; that you will have long scenes to set to music, and that in these scenes I shall require a recitative as natural as simple repetitions. Your Italian cadences are monotonous; the accents of our language are more favourable

and better supported. I beg you to mark it down in the same manner as I repeat it.'

" 'Well,' said he, 'we shall see.'

"In this manner we formed the design of bestowing on recitative that ease, that truth of expression which was so favourable to the performance of the celebrated actress for whom the character of Dido was intended.

"The time was short: I wrote the poem with great rapidity, and, in order to withdraw Piccini from the distractions of Paris, I invited him to come and compose with me in my country-house, for I had a very agreeable one, where we lived as a family during the summer months. On his arrival there, he set to work, and when he had completed his task, Saint-Huberty, the actress who was to play the part of Didon, was invited to come and dine with us. She sang the part, at night, from beginning to end, and entered into the spirit of it so thoroughly that I fancied she was on the stage. Piccini was delighted."<sup>1</sup>

At the moment when Marmontel and Piccini judged it advisable to put *Didon* into rehearsal, Madame Saint-Huberty was entitled to the annual *congé* which she had stipulated for and obtained some months previously; and she had made arrangements for a tour in Provence. She took her part with her, however, telling the authors that they could rehearse the opera without her, as they could rely upon her knowing her music quite thoroughly before she returned, and probably before any one else would be ready.

The rehearsals began at Fontainebleau, the part of the heroine being, as a rule, taken by a chorus-singer, who, without attempting to sing Madame Saint-Huberty's

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Marmontel* (edit. 1804), iii. 224 et seq.



music from beginning to end, read the part and did her best to replace the prima donna in the concerted pieces. On two or three occasions, however, Mlle. Maillard, a young actress, for whom the Intendant La Ferté had a very pronounced *tendresse*, was entrusted with the principal rôle.

The real Dido, meanwhile, was making a high successful tour in Provence, where she was everywhere received with enthusiasm. At Aix, she caught such a severe cold that for a time she lost her voice, but had, fortunately, fully recovered its use by the time she returned to Paris. "The part of Didon," she wrote to one of her friends in Provence, "having been composed for me, for my voice, and being the only very interesting part in this piece, it will be impossible to give it anywhere without me. This looks like conceit on my part, but I will explain the matter to you. The part of Didon is *all acting*. The recitative is so well composed that it is impossible to sing it.

"An immense number of persons had attended the early rehearsals of *Didon*, and had come to the conclusion that it was one of Piccini's worst productions. But Piccini consoled himself by saying: 'Wait till my Didon comes!' At the first rehearsal, which took place with myself in the part, every one said: 'Ah! he has re-composed the greater part of his opera!' And yet only four days had elapsed since the previous rehearsal. Piccini heard it and remarked: 'No, Messieurs, I have altered nothing in the part. But until now *Didon* was being played without Didon.'"

From which letter it will be gathered that undue modesty was not one of Madame Saint-Huberty's failings.

The day of the first representation drew near. The great singer resolved to carry out a radical change in her costume. She held, as Mlle. Clairon had held, that in order to faithfully represent the personages of antiquity, it was absolutely essential to investigate their manners and their characters, and to ascertain exactly the garments which they were in the habit of wearing.<sup>1</sup> She regarded the theatre as a picture which cannot hope to produce illusion, save by the fortunate accord of all its elements, and she was far from meeting with this accord in tragedy, in which the verse transported the audience to Rome or Sparta, but in which one saw appear Greeks wearing brocaded robes, with turbans on their heads, and Roman ladies with long trains borne by pages.<sup>2</sup>

This time she succeeded better than in *Ariane*, and went to the extreme of simplicity. She announced that the costume she proposed to adopt was an exact copy of a design by Moreau *le jeune*, sent from Rome, where the artist then was. The tunic was of linen, the buskins laced on the bare foot, the crown encircled by a veil, which fell down her back, the mantle of purple, the robe fastened by a girdle below the bosom.

We may imagine the astonishment of the committee

<sup>1</sup> See the author's "Queens of the French Stage" (London: Harpers'; New York: Scribners'. 1905), p. 314 *et seq.*

<sup>2</sup> The train of an ordinary actress was held by a page dressed in black and white, but actresses representing queens were entitled to two trains and two pages, who followed them everywhere they went. "Nothing is more diverting," writes a critic of the time, "than the perpetual movement of these little rascals, who have to run after the actress when she is rushing up and down the stage in moments of great distress. Their activity throws them into a state of perspiration, whilst their embarrassment and blunders invariably excite laughter. Thus a farce is always going on, which agreeably diverts the spectator in sad or touching situations."

of the Opera, of La Ferté, and of Amelot, when Madame Saint-Huberty, with Moreau's design in her hand, insisted that a costume exactly resembling it should be forthwith ordered for her. "She thus dared to patronise new ideas and to introduce to the Opera a costume designed by this reformer, whom they believed they had conquered."<sup>1</sup> All the authorities were up in arms against these exorbitant pretensions, but the actress's genius had rendered her all-powerful; her wishes could no longer be ignored, and they were obliged to yield. But every day the lady became more exacting in her demands, and poor La Ferté was driven to his wits' end to satisfy them. "I have just ordered Madame Saint-Huberty's robe," he writes to Amelot; "but it is terrible!" And again: "I have endeavoured to satisfy Madame Saint-Huberty's caprices in making her decide to content herself with some changes in her robe for the part of Didon!" Unhappy Intendant! The actress was now indeed taking an ample revenge for the rebuff she had sustained in *Ariane*.

*Didon* was at length presented on October 16, 1783. It was a dazzling triumph for both composer and actress. Never had such enthusiasm been witnessed at the Court. Louis XVI., though, as a rule, he did not care for opera, was delighted and declared that "this opera had given him as much pleasure as a fine tragedy." To mark his satisfaction, he at once decided that a pension of 1500 livres should be bestowed on the principal actress, and sent the Maréchal de Duras to compliment her and inform her of the pleasure she had afforded him.

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Madame Saint-Huberty*.



"This," writes one who was present, "was the finest scene of the evening. When the Maréchal de Duras arrived behind the scenes, followed by a crowd of courtiers in gala dress, Madame Saint-Huberty had not yet had time to change her costume. She was standing up, the crown on her head, draped in the purple mantle of the Queen of Carthage. Marmontel and Piccini, intoxicated with joy, had thrown themselves at her feet and were kissing her hands. One would have called them two criminals, whose lives she had just spared. They only rose when M. de Duras approached to repeat what the King had said. The actress listened to the marshal, and her countenance, still animated by inspiration, became illumined with the joy of this new triumph. The blush of pride rose to her forehead. She had so much grandeur, nobility, and majesty in her bearing, with these men at her feet, that better even than when upon the stage she conveyed the idea of the Queen of Carthage. All the great nobles present had the appearance of being only her courtiers."

Métra describes this scene in the ironical tone characteristic of him. He represents Piccini precipitating himself at the feet of the singer, and amorously squeezing her hand. He shows us Marmontel, although more slow to bend the knee, employing vows and the most tender expressions to assure her that she arouses in his heart the most novel and the most lively emotions. And he concludes: "What a pleasing contrast to picture to oneself in this scene Saint-Huberty, still clothed in the purple of Didon, receiving with dignity the incense of great noblemen and men of letters, and to behold her, as a voluptuary of the time found her, two days later, in Paris, playing a game of piquet with her page, at the

end of a table covered with a coarse and dirty dish-cloth ! ”

In Paris, the opera and the singer obtained an even greater triumph than at Fontainebleau. The evening of the first representation (December 1, 1783) was “ an evening of transports and delirium.” The public could not find means to express its admiration. At the conclusion of the impressive song,

“ Ah ! que je fus bien inspirée,”

the audience rose in a body and interrupted the performance with frenzied applause. At the touching air,

“ Ah ! prends pitié de ma faiblesse,”

there was not, we are assured, a dry eye in the whole house. “ What more glorious triumph,” writes one of the actress’s biographers, “ could this poor artiste in her days of toil and misery have ever dreamed of ! ”<sup>1</sup>

Among the critics, not a dissentient voice was heard ; all joined in a chorus of praise of *Didon* and the great lyric *tragédienne*. “ Madame Saint-Huberty,” wrote the *Mémoires secrets*, “ played the part with the highest talent. She excelled even herself, and showed herself not less a great actress than an accomplished singer.” “ It is the voice of Todi ; it is the acting of Clairon ! ” cries Grimm. “ It is a model which has not been seen

<sup>1</sup> On December 6, which was an off-day at the Opera, Madame Saint-Huberty attended a performance of the *Fausse Lord*, music by Piccini, words by Piccini *filz*, at the Comédie-Italienne. At the conclusion of the piece, when she was leaving her box, the whole audience rose, and burst into a tumult of applause, shouting : “ *Vive la reine de Carthage !* ” If, remarks Grimm, the public had been aware that, on that very day, by the exercise of rare delicacy and tact, the artiste had succeeded in reconciling Piccini and Sacchini, who had long been at variance, their enthusiasm would have been, if it were possible, even greater.

on the stage for a long time, and will not soon be seen again."

And Guinguéné, in his valuable study of the life and works of Piccini, writes: "The talent of this sublime actress has its origin in her extreme sensibility. An air might be better sung, but it would be impossible to give to any air, to any recitative, a truer, more passionate expression. No action could be more dramatic than hers, no silence more eloquent. One still recalls her terrible dumb-show, her tragic immobility; and the awful expression of her countenance during the long ritornello of the chorus of the priests, towards the end of the third act, and while the chorus is being sung.

"At the performance she did no more than replace herself in the position in which she had naturally found herself at the first general rehearsal. Some one spoke to her of the impression she had seemed to feel, and which she communicated to the whole audience.

"‘I really experienced it,’ she answered. ‘After the tenth bar, I felt as if I were dead.’<sup>1</sup>

"This reply," remarks Gaboriau, "reveals the whole secret of the great lyric *tragédienne's* talent. An actress of genius, she knew how to keep her head, but she surrendered her whole heart, her whole soul. She really suffered the grief which she expressed in so heartrending a manner; she really felt as if she were dying. And to such a point was this true that, after each performance, she was so ill and exhausted that she needed several hours to recover herself."<sup>2</sup>

It has been said that Madame Saint-Huberty was an infinitely better actress than she was a singer. This,

<sup>1</sup> *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de Nicolas Piccini.*

<sup>2</sup> *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 217.



however, was certainly not the case. Castil-Blaise declares her to have been the first vocalist worthy of the name who appeared at the French Opera; while one of her biographers points out that Piccini would never have composed for her so difficult an air as that beginning: "*Ab! que je fus bien inspirée,*" had he not known her to possess a cultivated voice, full of charm and expression.

But the best proof that she really could lay claim to exceptional vocal as well as dramatic talent, and was not merely "an actress who spoke song"—to borrow Grétry's definition of Madame Dugazon—is the success which attended her appearance at the "Concerts Spirituels," where she took her place beside Mara and Todi, and acquitted herself so well that some critics went so far as to speak of her as a formidable rival to these eminent singers.

The success of *Didon* continued unabated. At each performance, Madame Saint-Huberty "seemed to add something to the purity of tone, to the truth of expression, to the profundity of sensibility which she had displayed on the first evening."<sup>1</sup> At each performance a fresh ovation awaited her. On January 14, 1784, at the twelfth representation of the Opera, she was the recipient of an honour which up to that time was absolutely without precedent in France.

"At the end of the second act," writes Grimm, "which terminated with the pathetic trio between *Énée*, *Didon*, and her sister, a crown of laurel, badly aimed, fell into the orchestra. The person at whose feet it fell placed it on the edge of the stage. The public, with loud cries, demanded that it should be placed on *Didon's* head, which was done, by the demoiselle Gavau-

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, xii. 10.

dan, to the accompaniment of unanimous and prolonged applause. The actress, surprised and almost overwhelmed with confusion, experienced a shock so great that it was, for the moment, feared that she would be unable to finish her part. . . . This crown of laurel was tied with a white ribbon on which was embroidered these words : *Didon et Saint-Huberty sont immortelles.*"<sup>1</sup>

À propos of this coronation, La Ferté wrote to Amelot:

"Another trouble, Monseigneur. I do not know whether you have been informed that on Friday evening last a crown, bearing the inscription : '*À la immortelle Saint-Huberty,*' was thrown upon the stage. The actress who was playing with her picked it up and placed it on Madame Saint-Huberty's head. This episode, apparently the result of an arrangement concerted with the demoiselle Saint-Huberty, cannot be ignored ; for those who in this manner give crowns (an incident hitherto without example in the theatre in connection with an actor) might equally accustom themselves to throw baked apples and oranges, as happens in England, at an actor who does not meet with their approbation. The confusion would then be beyond remedy !"

The Intendant then goes on to say that the honour paid her had not rendered Madame Saint-Huberty more accommodating, since she had refused to play on the following Tuesday, and, as the receipts for that evening would inevitably show a great decrease, if *Didon* were not performed, he suggests that the prima donna should be replaced by Mlle. Maillard, whom, as we have mentioned elsewhere, M. de la Ferté honoured with his favours. The old Intendant must have been very much in love or exceedingly deaf, for he actually goes so far

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, xii. 10.

as to assure Amelot that Mlle. Maillard's voice is one which may well excite the envy of Madame Saint-Huberty.

Mlle. Maillard secured the appearance she coveted, though Madame Saint-Huberty protested vigorously against her being allowed to play the part, on the ground that it was an infringement of the last clause of the agreement of the previous March, which provided that no other actress should be allowed to play any part which she had created, save at her own suggestion. But the young lady must have regretted her misplaced ambition, for the public, learning of its idol's feeling in the matter, accorded her anything but a flattering reception.

The acclamations of Court and capital did not content Madame Saint-Huberty; she desired the applause of the whole of France, and she received it. The enthusiasm of the provinces indeed reached the point of absurdity; a royal progress could hardly have been more splendid.

At Marseilles, the first city of importance which she visited, and where she gave no less than twenty-three representations, it was resolved to organise a magnificent fête in her honour. Cannon thundered salutes, the vessels in the harbour were decorated with flags, and, in the evening, the entire city was illuminated. An eight-oared gondola, lined throughout with satin and furnished with velvet cushions, had been prepared for the occasion, in which the prima donna embarked, arrayed in a Greek costume of the most extravagant richness, the gift of the ladies of Marseilles. The gondola was then rowed out to sea, escorted by more than one hundred vessels of various kinds, including several barges filled with



musicians. Aquatic sports were held, the victors in which had the felicity of being crowned by the heroine of the day.

On her return to land, the cannon again fired salutes; the whole population had flocked to the quays. The diva was conducted, through an avenue of illuminated pavilions, to a pleasure-house, where she rested for a while in a salon of verdure lighted by coloured lanterns. Then she entered a tent, in which a temporary theatre had been constructed, where an allegorical play was performed in her honour, and Apollo crowned her with laurel as the "tenth" Muse. A ball followed, during which Madame Saint-Huberty occupied a seat on a daïs between Melpomene and Thalia. Finally, a splendid supper, to which sixty of the principal inhabitants of Marseilles sat down, was served in a room protected by a wooden grill, to guard the idol against the too-pressing attentions of her worshippers. At dessert, Madame Saint-Huberty sang several couplets in the Provençal patois, the people joining in the chorus. The enthusiasm of the city on this memorable night was indescribable, and spread far into the country.

When, at length, the prima donna contrived to tear herself away from her admirers at Marseilles, an extra horse had to be harnessed to her post-chaise, to draw the trophies of her twenty-three performances, which included more than a hundred crowns.

At Toulouse, if the fêtes were less splendid, there was no diminution in the enthusiasm of the public. In the third act of *Didon*, the performance was suddenly stopped, while twelve young girls, dressed in white, advanced towards Madame Saint-Huberty. They carried a basket of flowers surmounted by a crown, which their leader

begged the singer to accept, as "the tribute of a grateful country."

At Strasburg—her birthplace and the town where she had made her first appearance on the stage—which she visited in the summer of 1787, the ovations continued. There, amongst a thousand other compliments in verse, of various degrees of merit, she received the following gallant madrigal :

" Romains qui vous vantez d'une illustre origine,  
Voyez d'où dépendait votre empire naissant :  
Didon n'eut pas de charme assez puissant  
Pour arrêter la fuite où son amant s'obstine ;  
Mais si l'autre Didon, ornement de ces lieux,  
Eût été reine de Carthage,  
Il eût, pour la servir, abandonné ses dieux,  
Et votre beau pays serait encor sauvage."

These verses have been ascribed by Edmond de Goncourt, Gaboriau, and several other writers to no less a personage than Napoleon Bonaparte, then a young officer of artillery. But they are in error, for M. Adolphe Jullien, who has carefully investigated the matter, points out that Napoleon passed the whole of the year 1787 not at Strasburg, but in Corsica.

Space forbids us to give more than a very brief account of the remaining triumphs of this truly great artiste, who, no matter how unfavourable the verdict of the public and the critics might be in regard to some of the works in which she appeared, was always herself assured of applause and commendation. In the title-part of the *Chimène* of Sacchini, as Délie, in the *Tibulle et Délie* of Fuzelier and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, as Hypermnestre, in that superb opera of the *Danaïdes*, which made the

name of Salieri worthy to rank with those of Gluck, Piccini, and Sacchini, she astonished and delighted the musical world scarcely less than she had in Piccini's masterpiece. And such was her passionate love of her art and her amazing capacity for hard work that all these four most difficult and most varied rôles—*Didon*, *Chimène*, *Délie*, and *Hypermnestre*, of which three at least are among the most beautiful figures to which the lyric art has lent life—were studied, mastered, and represented within the space of some seven months : from October 16, 1783 to April 26, 1784.<sup>1</sup>

Two years after the great success of their *Didon*, Marmontel and Piccini reappeared on the stage of the Opera with *Pénélope*. Unfortunately, the vogue which the preceding work had obtained had aroused too many expectations in regard to this new essay—author and composer, so to speak, were the victims of their own excellence—and though *Pénélope* was, in its way, a fine opera, it was received in comparative silence. All the critics, however, were agreed that Madame Saint-Huberty, in the part of the virtuous wife of Ulysses, was superb, and that she had seldom been heard to more advantage than in the two airs : “*Je le vois, cette ombre errante,*” and “*Il est affreux, il est horrible,*” and in the scene where Telemachus comes to announce the return of her husband.

It was Madame Saint-Huberty again who, in May, 1786, rescued from complete disaster the *Thémistocle* of Philidor, which, after a tolerably good reception by

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Madame Saint-Huberty*. M. Jullien says “in less than five months.” He forgets that *Didon*, although not seen at the Opera until December 1, 1783, had been performed at Fontainebleau in the previous October.



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the Court, had been greeted, at first, by the town with marked disfavour; and it was not one of her least successes to have invested with life the inanimate figure of the heroine, Mandane.

In November of the same year, the singer was able to discharge the debt of gratitude which she owed to her first master, Lemoine. Lemoine, it will be remembered had, some years before, produced an *Électre*, which had failed, in spite of the heroic efforts of his former pupil. Now, however, he had composed a far more important work on the subject of Phædra, from which he expected great things; and Madame Saint-Huberty exerted all her influence to secure it precedence over the *Œdipe* of Sacchini, who was also impatiently awaiting his turn.

Unhappily, she succeeded. Sacchini had the Queen's promise that his work should be the first to be performed before the Court, at Fontainebleau; but one day Marie Antoinette approached him, and said, with tears in her eyes: "M. Sacchini; it is said that I show too much favour to foreigners. I have been so earnestly solicited to allow the *Phèdre* of M. Lemoine to be performed, in place of your *Œdipe*, that I could not refuse. You see my position; forgive me."

The poor Italian was so bitterly disappointed at the indefinite postponement of the work, upon which he had based so many hopes, that he fell ill that same evening and died, three months later, without having been able to assist at the production of the masterpiece which was to render his name immortal.<sup>1</sup>

Lemoine's *Phèdre*, the precedence for which had been

<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Jullien, *L'Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Madame Saint-Huberty*.

so dearly purchased, was coldly received by the Court, and still more coldly by the town; and it was in vain that Madame Saint-Huberty called to her aid all her genius to save the work of her old master. At the third performance the theatre was almost empty. Ultimately, however, it proved a success, thanks to the ingenious intervention of a friend of the composer.

This friend was Quidor, the police-inspector who had been charged with the pursuit of the dancer Nivelon.<sup>1</sup> Quidor had under his professional supervision a great number of ladies of easy virtue, whom he invited, "in a manner which did not permit of any refusal," to attend and to make their friends attend the performances of *Phèdre*. The theatre, deserted at the third representation, was crammed to suffocation at the fifth; dazzling toilettes appeared in all the boxes, while the applause was positively deafening; for the ingenious inspector had filled the pit and galleries with police in plain clothes, with orders not to spare their hands or voices.

This strategy was attended with complete success. The performers recovered their spirits, which had been naturally much damped by having to sing to empty boxes, and rendered full justice to what was really an admirable work; at the tenth representation the true public began to arrive, found the music charming, and joined heartily in the applause.<sup>2</sup>

The character of Madame Saint-Huberty was far less agreeable than her talent. Dauvergne, the director of the Opera, declared that she was the most abandoned woman in his theatre—which was to say a good deal—

<sup>1</sup> See p. 128 note, *supra*.

<sup>2</sup> *Mémoires secrets*, December 20, 1786.

and, in a letter to Amelot, cited by Edmond de Goncourt, in his monograph on the actress, charges her with the most revolting vices—the same of which Sophie Arnould and Mlle. Raucourt had formerly been accused. Moreover, she was insolent and exacting, and wearied the administration with her caprices and pretensions.

“She is a great musician,” writes La Ferté, in 1784, to Amelot, “abounding in talent and essential to the Academy. If Nature had not lavished upon her all the necessary qualifications, Art would have created a prodigy in her favour. This artiste is too well aware that she is necessary to the Opera, in default of persons who can replace her with advantage. She is full of pretensions; she has intelligence, but a bad disposition. She must be humoured, but not spoilt, otherwise she will make herself, so to speak, the sovereign arbitrix of the Opera.”<sup>1</sup>

During a visit to Lyons, in 1785, where she was received with the same enthusiasm as elsewhere in the provinces, Madame Saint-Huberty conceived a violent fancy for the local tenor, one Saint-Aubin by name, who took the part of *Énée* in *Didon*, and did not rest content with making love to him on the stage. When her *congé* expired, nothing would satisfy her but that the fascinating tenor should follow her to Paris, and no sooner had she returned to the capital than she persuaded the administration to engage him for the Opera, and an *ordre de début* was accordingly despatched to Lyons:

“*De Par Le Roi :*

“The sieur Saint-Aubin, tenor of the Lyons theatre,

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Campardon, *Académie royal de Musique au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*: Article, “Saint-Huberty.”



is directed to come immediately to Paris, to make his *début* on the stage of the Opera.

“Executed at Paris, etc.”

In vain did the management of the Lyons theatre represent that the services of the sieur Saint-Aubin could not possibly be dispensed with ; that there was no one to replace him ; that he had anticipated his salary to the extent of 3433 livres, 4 sols. ; that the theatre, already in a bad way financially, would be completely ruined by his departure, and so forth. The authorities in Paris, spurred on by the amorous prima donna, were inexorable, and the sieur Saint-Aubin had to obey. He made his *début* on December 9, 1785, as Atys, in Piccini’s opera of that name, and was pronounced by the critics a tolerably good singer, but far too stout for a lover—at least on the stage.

After a year of love duets with Madame Saint-Huberty, the passion of the stout tenor began to cool. The husband awoke in him ; he remembered that he had left at Lyons a young and charming wife and two pretty children, and manifested a strong inclination to rejoin them. Fearful of losing her lover altogether, the prima donna resigned herself to sharing him with another, and a second imperious summons, in the King’s name, brought to Paris the young wife and the two children. And that is how Madame Saint-Aubin, afterwards a great attraction at the Opéra-Comique, was introduced to the Paris stage.

The arrogance and caprices of Madame Saint-Huberty increased every year ; the letters of Dauvergne to La Ferté and Amelot teem with complaints in regard to her conduct. On May 22, 1785, the lady had promised the director to sing the following evening in *Armide*, and that

opera had duly been announced. But, at eleven o'clock the next morning, a message came that Madame Saint-Huberty was not fit to sing, that she had temporarily lost her voice; but that she was about to try a remedy which she had never yet known to fail, and would let him know definitely at two o'clock whether she would appear or not. An hour later, a friend of the singer called upon Dauvergne to inform him that the remedy had not yet had the desired effect, but that, if at four o'clock the lost voice had returned, its owner would "make an effort." Finally, almost at the last moment, Madame Saint-Huberty sent a servant to announce that it was absolutely impossible for her to appear that evening; and an actress, who was only very imperfectly acquainted with the part—for, since no one was allowed to replace the imperious prima donna, save with her own consent, it was worth no one's while to understudy her—was compelled to sing the difficult rôle of Armide, and to be soundly hissed for her pains.

A few days later, Madame Saint-Huberty started for her annual tour in the provinces. On the eve of her departure, there was a terrible scene, in the green-room, between the actress and Dauvergne, because the latter had very properly declined to allow the lady to carry away with her ten costumes, the property of the theatre, the removal of which would have rendered it impossible to play any of the operas for which they had been designed until Madame Saint-Huberty returned or fresh ones had been made.

The arrogance and insolence of the prima donna seem to have reached a climax in the year 1787. On January 13, at a general meeting of the company, called for the purpose of examining the accounts, Madame

Saint-Huberty rising from her seat, "not like a reasonable woman, but like a Fury," denounced Vion, the conductor of the orchestra, who had apparently declined to allow her to take liberties with the time, as incapable of holding the bâton, and demanded his immediate dismissal, vowing that if he appeared again in the orchestra, she would, no matter what might be the result, refuse to sing her part.

At the end of the following March, some days before the annual closing of the theatre, and without troubling to ask permission, the actress started off for Alsace, with the view of singing at the Strasburg theatre. She was, however, speedily followed by a courier, with a letter for the director at Strasburg, forbidding him to allow her to appear, and orders for the lady to return immediately to Paris.

She obeyed, burning with indignation and resolved no longer to submit to such humiliations, and wrote to the long-suffering Dauvergne the following letter :

"The trouble, the disgust and the vexation occasioned me by the reprimands and threats which your continual complaints bring upon me from the Minister (Amelot), far from increasing my courage, affect my health and strength, and will end by bringing about what is so ardently desired : the renunciation of my engagement, which it is wished to annul, and my definite retirement from the theatre; for it is impossible for me to support any longer such vexations. You know, Monsieur, that I am not ignorant how much you hate me, and that I expect to feel all the effects of your hatred."

However, in spite of this letter, Madame Saint-Huberty did not actually retire from the Opera until more than three years later.



Not only did Madame Saint-Huberty treat the wishes of the authorities of the Opera with contempt, but she encouraged others to follow her example. In September 1786, a certain Mlle. Gavaudan, one of her particular friends, relying on her support, refused to sing in a now forgotten opera called *Le Toison d'Or*, presumably because she considered the rôle of Calliope, for which she had been cast, unworthy of her talents. Thereupon, Dauvergne, according to the custom in such cases, obtained a *lettre de cachet*, in virtue of which the recalcitrant actress was carried off to the prison of La Force, where she would appear to have been treated as a first-class misdemeanant. Madame Saint-Huberty was furious at the punishment meted out to her *protégée*; threatened the director that she would employ all the influence at her command to have him driven ignominiously from his post, and demanded that Mlle. Gavaudan should be permitted to leave the prison, in order that she might dine with her and sing her part in Sacchini's *Ænone*, before the general rehearsal. This request was granted; but the pleasure of the two friends was somewhat marred by the fact that a police-agent was deputed to accompany the young lady to the prima donna's house and escort her back to prison afterwards. Madame Saint-Huberty then wrote an impertinent letter to La Ferté, insisting on the immediate and unconditional release of her friend; but failed to obtain any satisfaction in that quarter; and, shortly afterwards, Mlle. Gavaudan, having been threatened with a period of solitary confinement, if she continued contumacious, decided to capitulate, and sang the despised part of Calliope very charmingly, notwithstanding the fact that she was in a state of semi-intoxication at the time.

A prolific source of dispute between Madame Saint-Huberty and the administration of the Opera, and one in which the singer is certainly entitled to every sympathy, was her determination to wear the costumes appropriate to the parts she played. The chief objection on the part of the authorities to gratify her wishes in this respect was on the score of expense, for never was theatre conducted with such sordid, such cheeseparing, economy as the Paris Opera. In 1784, a special general meeting of the committee was considered necessary to examine the design of a costume which Madame Saint-Huberty desired for the part of Armide, and to decide whether she should be permitted to have it. "The committee," says the report on the subject addressed to Amelot, "considering that this part, in which Madame Saint-Huberty has not yet been seen, might give to the work the charm of novelty and procure for the Opera advantageous receipts during several representations, believes that they ought to give to Madame Saint-Huberty the satisfaction she deserves, the more so since she has no objection to sharing the part with Mlle. Levasseur, it having been arranged that, in case she should be indisposed, the dress should be worn by the actresses who replace her."

In the margin of this report, the Minister writes as follows: "Good for this time only, and without the establishment of a precedent. All the members, without distinction, must wear the costumes provided for them by the administration, so long as they are in a fit state to be worn."<sup>1</sup>

But the authorities were seldom so complacent. Two years later, there was a sharp difference of opinion in

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 190.

regard to the necessity of certain costumes which Madame Saint-Huberty had demanded for the operas of *Pénélope* and *Alceste*; and La Ferté wrote to the singer the following letter:

"It is not M. de la Laistic, Madame, who decides what dresses are to be made for the performances before the Court, but the persons appointed by the King to supervise the costumes and the expenses. I cannot disguise from you that at Fontainebleau there was much displeasure about the dress which you exacted, and which, almost on your sole authority, you had caused to be made for the part of *Pénélope*, which appeared in no way suitable either to the position of that princess, so long afflicted, or to the magnificence of the period, fabulous though it was. You must have noticed that it was not thought becoming for you to wear it in Paris. . . . To-day, you demand a simpler dress for *Alceste*. . . . Finally, I am going to send your letter to M. Bocquet,<sup>1</sup> that he may consult with M. Dauvergne and cause what is necessary to be done. You must be convinced of our desire to satisfy you in all reasonable things, and to be agreeable to you. But, at the same time, you ought to understand that you are obliged to conform, like all your comrades, and those who played the first parts before you, to the regulations and to the costumes selected for them. For, if each one desired to dress according to individual taste, the result would be inextricable confusion, and an expenditure both useless and ruinous for the King and the Opera. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Then, in September 1788, we find Dauvergne writing to La Ferté that fresh complications had arisen, because

<sup>1</sup> The superintendent of the wardrobe of the Opera.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 171,



Madame Saint-Huberty had demanded two new dresses for the part of Chimène, in Sacchini's opera of that name, and one for each of her four attendants. He finds comfort, however, in the reflection, that, in the event of the lady refusing to sing, owing to her request not being acceded to, he has provided himself with no less than four substitutes.

About the same time, there was a good deal of friction between Madame Saint-Huberty and the administration on the subject of a *chignon*, which the prima donna had taken upon herself to order, without apparently consulting the committee. The bill for this *chignon*, the design for which had been submitted to a number of experts, was pronounced by the committee "horribly dear," and they unanimously decided that in future none must be ordered, unless the sketch and the estimate had first been approved by themselves.

The amours of the great actresses, *danseuses*, and singers of the eighteenth century occupy almost as much space in the memoirs and correspondence of the time as their professional triumphs. With a regularity and a wealth of detail which would be beyond all praise, if applied to some more worthy subject, the Bachaumonts and Métras recount day by day the private history of these courtesan-artistes, register the births and deaths of their fleeting attachments, and give us without interruption the long succession of noble and wealthy admirers who succumbed to their charms. But the career of Madame Saint-Huberty seems to have provided the chroniclers of contemporary scandal with singularly little which they deem worthy to be transmitted to posterity. Possibly, as one of the biographers suggests, this is to be

accounted for by the humble social position occupied by those whom she honoured with her favours; for the *Vol plus haut* credits the queen of the Opera with tender relations with several third-rate financiers and obscure concert-singers, to whom, of course, must be added the tenor Saint-Aubin. However, that may be, the only lover of any social distinction that we hear of is the Marquis de Louvois,<sup>1</sup> until, during the last years of her career at the Opera, the singer developed a sincere and lasting attachment for the Comte de Launai d'Antraigues.

Louis de Launai d'Antraigues—a very handsome man, according to Madame Vigée Lebrun—was born about 1755, at Ville-Neuve-de-Berg, in Le Vivarais. He claimed descent from the celebrated d'Antraigues, the companion-in-arms of Henri IV., to whom that monarch wrote, in 1588: “. . . I hope that you are by this time recovered of the wound that you received at Coutras, fighting so valiantly by my side; and, if it be as I hope, do not fail (for by God's aid, in a little while, we shall have fighting to do, and, consequently, great need of your services) to start immediately to rejoin us.” Later, when the count was sitting in the States-General, as the representative of Le Vivarais, this claim, which would have entitled him to certain privileges, was contested; but he was indisputably of good family, and his mother was a Saint-Priest, sister to the Minister

<sup>1</sup> It is true that Métra writes, under date March 24, 1783, as follows: “Mlle. Laguerre had been for a long time the mistress of the Duc de Bouillon. Madame Saint-Huberti has replaced her in the heart of this prince and in her rights on his fortune. He has just purchased her favours, so many times cheaply disposed of, by a contract of one hundred thousand écus.” But Edmond de Goncourt is inclined to think that Métra is here drawing upon his very vivid imagination with more than his usual freedom.

of that name. He appears to have begun life in the army in the Regiment du Vivarais, which, however, he soon quitted, according to one account, because he had declined to fight a duel. Afterwards, he spent several years in foreign travel, and on his return to France, divided his time between his country-seat and Paris, where he frequented the society of philosophers and men of science, among whom were Jean Jacques Rousseau and the Montgolfiers.

An ardent politician and possessed of considerable literary gifts, he, in 1788, made his *début* as a publicist by a *Mémoire sur les états généraux, leurs droits et la manière de les convoquer*, which showed a marked predilection for republican government, and created no small sensation. However, his opinions underwent a sudden and startling transformation soon after he had taken his seat in the States-General, and thenceforth he combated with warmth the very doctrines of which he had once been the ardent advocate. So complete a *volte-face* naturally excited the ridicule and contempt of his former political friends, and Mirabeau, in a published letter addressed to him, compared him to a weathercock; but that he was animated by sincere conviction there can be no question.

At what period began the connection between the count and the singer, which was to end in so tragic a manner, is uncertain. But, according to a letter written by d'Antraigues to his wife, after their secret marriage in 1790, their first relations went back to 1783. However that may be, d'Antraigues did not immediately become the lady's lover, for his early letters, several of which were in the possession of Edmond de Goncourt, at the time when he wrote his monograph on the actress,



reveal him as still in the character of a *soupirant*, and a very humble one at that. "I beg you," one of these epistles concludes, "to continue your kindness towards me, and to be well assured of the esteem and attachment with which you have inspired me."

Gradually, however, the esteem and attachment develop into a warmer feeling, and we find him imploring her not to forget "a man who loves her heart and her virtues," though two hundred leagues separate them. One of these later letters, written in answer to some complaints of Madame Saint-Huberty in regard to the envious and jealous persons by whom she was surrounded, is of interest, since it shows that at the height of her fame the great singer still led a simple life, and that, even if she were the abandoned woman that Dauvergne declared her to be, she did not stoop to venal amours :

"I have heard them (her enemies), it is true, seek to turn you into ridicule, accuse you of loving to save money, jeer at your simplicity, and laugh at you for driving about Paris in a hackney-coach. But I have also seen honest and excellent men love and admire you on account of this very simplicity. Do you think that one can see, without sympathy, without enthusiasm, an amiable and celebrated woman leave her house in a hackney-coach, when it would be easy for her to be drawn in the gilded chariot of vice and infamy ? It is beautiful, it is noble, to exhibit honesty and virtue in the haunt of baseness, greed, and the most abject passions. It is sweet to see talent in all its brilliancy associated with the virtues of a noble soul. It is delightful, for those who can appreciate it, to be able to yield to the most true enthusiasm. It is glorious for the woman who inspires it not to excite in the heart of her admirers

that regret which is occasioned by the sight of a sublime talent exercised by a man or woman who personally, is contemptible.”<sup>1</sup>

Madame Saint-Huberty, on her side, was far from insensible to the count's devotion. Writing from Bordeaux, in September 1784, she informed him that she keeps his bust in her room, and that all the crowns she receives in the theatre from her enthusiastic admirers she places on his head. And, at length, three years later, comes a very tender and charming letter, which shows us that the thin dividing line between friendship and love has already been passed :

“ Endeavour to make Cabanis love me a little, in order that he may cure me.<sup>2</sup> I fear to die, since thou hast told me that thou dost believe that thou canst love me always. I believe thee, so far as it is in me to believe that which does not depend on ourselves. See what it is to love people for themselves or their virtues. For myself, I am well assured that I shall love thee always, whatever may happen, because before I loved thee, I desired for thee all thy good qualities. . . . My beloved, when I think that nothing stands in the way of our happiness, my heart thrills with pleasure ; but this thought does not render the present moment very agreeable. I am working to become independent, and I am killing myself.

“ If I have lost, by the constant labours and fatigues which I have undergone, the freshness of youth, in which coarse-grained men find pleasure, I hope that, in forming

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *Madame Saint-Huberty*, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Cabanis was the Comte d'Antraigues's physician in Paris. Shortly before this letter was written, Madame Saint-Huberty had placed herself under his care and presumably he was still prescribing for her.

my heart on that of the one I love, it will take the place of all that another than thyself might desire. I love thee with passion, and it is not blind ; thou canst not change thy nature, and that is all that interests me in thee."

Madame Saint-Huberty's assertion that she was "killing herself" was merely a figure of speech ; but, at the same time, there was no disputing the fact that the immense amount of work she voluntarily imposed on herself during her provincial tours had told heavily upon her, and was gradually destroying the freshness of her voice, so that she now never sang more than twice a week, and had been compelled to abandon several of her most famous rôles, which she dared no longer attempt. "Yesterday," writes Dauvergne to La Ferté, "the demoiselle Saint-Huberty appeared to the public to have lost much of her voice. I predicted to you that this woman would not last another two years. I am persuaded that, if she makes another provincial tour, she will finish herself altogether." Nevertheless, she still retained her hold on the affections of the public, and, on the evenings on which she was announced to sing, all Paris flocked to the Bouvelard Saint-Martin.

It was well for the administration of the Opera that, in the splendid houses which Madame Saint-Huberty never failed to draw they were able to find some compensation for the lady's insolence and insubordination which, in these later years, passed all bounds. At the beginning of October 1789, she, as usual at the eleventh hour, declined to sing the part of Chimène, in Sacchini's opera of that name, on the ground of feeling too fatigued. The authorities, aware that this was merely an excuse.



insisted on her appearing, when she replied that she would "make an effort," on condition that an employé of the theatre, named Parisi, who had recently been discharged for drunkenness and insolence, should be at once reinstated. This, however, was too much even for the long-suffering Dauvergne to submit to; and the threat of mulcting her in a month's salary saved the situation.

At the weekly meetings of the company, at which it was customary to settle the répertoire for the ensuing week, and where the administrative correspondence was read, Madame Saint-Huberty never failed to create some unpleasantness or other. Now, she would encourage some unruly actress or *danseuse* to resist the authority of the director; now, she would punctuate the reading of the comminatory letters of La Ferté with bursts of derisive laughter (no wonder that the old Intendant alludes to her, in writing to Dauvergne as "*une impudente coquine*"); anon, she would object to the arrangements for the week. How was it possible, she would inquire, for her to sing *Alceste* on Friday, after singing *Didon* on Tuesday? Did they wish to kill her? Dauvergne would innocently suggest that another actress should sing *Didon*, and that Madame Saint-Huberty should rest, that her voice might be fresh for *Alceste*. What! Allow another actress to sing *Didon*!—her own rôle!—her own creation! No one but herself should sing it, so long as she remained a member of the company.

Finally, the unfortunate administration, for the sake of peace and tranquillity, agreed that the lady should not be required to sing more than once a week, that is to say on Fridays, the fashionable night at the Opera.

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In March 1790, the Comte d'Antraigues openly accused of apostacy, denounced by the revolutionary Press to public vengeance, and the recipient, every day, of violent anonymous letters threatening assassination, deemed it prudent to quit France. On April 3, Madame Saint-Huberty obtained a passport to Geneva and, accompanied by her *femme de chambre* and two men-servants, set out for Switzerland, where she joined the count in the environs of Lausanne.

The two lovers remained for nearly three months at Lausanne, and then removed to a château, near Minderisio, belonging to the Count Turconi, and here, on December 29, they were secretly married in the neighbouring church of Saint-Eusèbe.

For grave reasons known to himself, the Bishop of Como, in whose diocese the marriage took place, had granted to the officiating priest permission to perform the ceremony without inquiries or proofs, at whatever date, hour, or place the parties might select.

The day after the marriage, the count addressed to his wife the following letter :

" I may die, my dear wife, and cannot acquit myself too soon of the most sacred of duties.

" It is possible that there may be wanting to our union some of the formalities, which, according to the law of France, are required for the legalisation of marriages, and imperious circumstances may prevent me from fulfilling them for some time to come.

" If I happen to die before that time, I wish you to render to my memory the honour which you owe it, by rendering to yourself that which is due to you.

" I declare then that, after seven years of mutual confidence, I have united by marriage to my destiny the

woman who has had the courage to wish to share my misfortunes ; that, on December 29, 1790, after having obtained from the Bishop of Como a dispensation for the publication of banns, and permission for us to marry at any time and place that might please us, I married you in the Château of Castel San-Pietro, in the presence of two priests as witnesses.

“With several reasons for keeping this marriage secret, I did not conceal from you the most imperative of all : the grief it would cause my worthy and venerable mother. But I knew her ; if she had only tears to give to my memory, she would forgive our secret union, and would see only the wife of her son in the woman who watched over his destinies, who softened their rigour, and who received the last sighs of his heart.”

Towards the end of the following year, the Comtesse d’Antraigues became *enceinte*. The marriage having been kept secret, the count was anxious that the birth of the child should not be known in the neighbourhood ; and it was at a little village on the outskirts of Milan that, on June 26, 1792, the ex-singer presented him with a son, baptized two days later, under the names of Pierre Antoine Emmanuel Jules, born of the illustrious Emmanuel Louis Alexandre Henri de Launai, Comte d’Antraigues and of the dame Antoinette Clavel. So soon as the countess was sufficiently recovered to travel, she, with her husband and infant son, returned to Mindrisio.

From this quiet corner of Italian Switzerland, where he lived with the former queen of the Opera, the Comte d’Antraigues combated the men and things of the new France, in a series of very able brochures, wherein he



constituted himself the speaking-trumpet of the counter-Revolution. But he was very far from being content with this warfare of the pen. He became the devoted servant of the Bourbons, the intermediary between them and the Courts of St. James's, Madrid, Berlin, and Vienna, and rendered material assistance in weaving that network of secret intrigue, which, in spite of the successes of the French armies, for long rendered doubtful the establishment of the new order of things.<sup>1</sup>

In discharge of these diplomatic missions, he travelled incessantly, accompanied everywhere by his wife, who shared his fatigues and dangers, and received, in return, his full confidence. The count and countess were at Venice, in May 1795, when the city was occupied by the French troops. The count, who was at the time specially attached to the Russian legation, left with the Minister and his suite, accompanied by his wife and child; but at Trieste the party was stopped by orders of Bernadotte, who commanded the French there, and d'Antraigues arrested.

On being told that he was to be sent to Milan, the count begged the Russian Minister to take charge of Madame Saint-Huberty—for by that name she was still known—but the ex-singer insisted on sharing his captivity.

Touched by so much devotion, d'Antraigues explained to his captors that the lady was his lawful wife, and obtained permission for her to accompany him to Milan. "I declared at once to my tyrants," he says,

<sup>1</sup> All sorts of legends have gathered round the Comte d'Antraigues, who is depicted as a kind of Royalist Marat, ready to demand, on the return of the Bourbons, "his four hundred thousand heads." One story is to the effect that, when in Venice, he had been heard to boast that he had caused several agents of the French Republic to be poisoned,

“that I was married, that I had a son, and that I desired to see him. They acceded to my request. She came, with that dear child of five years old, who threw himself upon me. That moment, which made her mine for ever, caused me to forget my foes, my persecutors, the future and the present. I owe that to my persecutors. To say how much I was indebted to my wife in these frightful circumstances is beyond my power. Never did there exist a courage more firm, a soul more mistress of itself, a character stronger in adversity; never did one behold more self-confidence in misfortune.”

At Milan, the count was at first imprisoned in a convent, where prisoners of war were confined, but, soon afterwards, taken to the citadel, and there placed in a dungeon, twelve feet long by six broad. Thanks, however, to the urgent representations of his wife, he was, some weeks later, liberated on parole, the understanding being that he was not to leave the city or even change his residence. But, in the early hours of the morning of August 25, he broke his parole and escaped, his flight, thanks to the ingenuity of his wife, who gave out that he was ill in bed, and went about the house preparing broth and other remedies, not being discovered till some days later.

It has been suggested that, for reasons of their own, the French authorities at Milan connived at the count's escape; but it seems more probable that he fled through fear of being sent to Paris, where he would certainly have been brought to trial and very possibly executed. Such was undoubtedly the opinion in Royalist circles, and, to recognise the countess's courage and devotion and her services to the “cause,” the Comte de Provence,

in his theoretical character of King of France, sent her the order of Saint-Michel.<sup>1</sup>

Successively we find the adventurous couple at Vienna, Berlin, and Dresden, in which last-named city they seemed to have passed the greater part of the year 1804, the whole of the year 1805, and the first months of the year 1806, the count, who had been nominated a Counsellor of State by the Emperor Alexander of Russia, corresponding with Sweden, through Alopeus, the Swedish Minister in London, and working generally to bring about a European coalition against Napoleon. In September 1806, driven from Dresden by Napoleon's victories, and unable to find an asylum on the Continent, they quitted Germany and established themselves in England. Here they resided in a pretty cottage at Barnes, and lived in good style on the various pensions which they had received. The count lost no time in entering into negotiations with the English Government, to whom he is said to have communicated the articles, real or imaginary, of the Treaty of Tilsit, though how he contrived to obtain particulars of a treaty drawn up with so much privacy is somewhat difficult to understand.

However, that may be, it is certain that d'Antraigues was employed by the Foreign Office in certain delicate negotiations and that he received a pension in return

<sup>1</sup> This was not the only reward of her services which the ex-singer received. In 1804, the Emperor of Austria accorded her a pension of 1000 ducats, "in memory of the services rendered by her to her late Majesty Marie Antoinette of France, as superintendent of the music of that august princess." As for the Comte d'Antraigues, he was, for some years, in receipt of a handsome pension from the various European Courts, and, in May 1800, received from the king of the Two Sicilies the royal order of Constantine, together with a pension.



for his services ; and it was this which, according to a legend which still finds acceptance with some French writers, brought about the tragic end of both himself and his wife, on the morning of July 22, 1812.

The story went that Fouché, desirous of discovering what was going on between d'Antraigues and the English Government, despatched two trusted agents to London, with orders at all costs to intercept the correspondence. The agents succeeded in bribing the count's Piedmontese servant Lorenzo, to tamper with the letters which passed between his master and the Foreign Office ; and that this man, finding that his treachery was certain to be discovered, through a visit which the count was on the point of making to Canning, in a moment of frenzied despair, assassinated both his master and mistress, and then took his own life. From the evidence given at the inquest, however, it would appear that Lorenzo committed the crime, in a fit of frenzy, due simply to his having received notice to leave the count's service.

The *Times* of July 23, 1812, contained the following account of the tragedy :

“The Count and Countess d'Antraigues, French noblesse, and distantly related to the unfortunate family of the Bourbons, resided on Barnes Terrace, on the banks of the Thames. They lived in a style which, though far from what they had formerly moved in, yet was rather bordering on high life than the contrary. They kept a carriage, coachman, footman, and a servant out of livery. The latter was an Italian or Piedmontese, named Lawrence, and it is of this wretch that we have to relate the following particulars. The Count and Countess, intending to visit London as yesterday, ordered the carriage to be at the door by eight in the morning,

which it accordingly was; and, soon after that hour, they were in the act of leaving the house to get into it, the Countess being at the door, the Count coming downstairs, when the report of a pistol was heard in the passage, which, it has since appeared, took no effect, nor was it then ascertained by whom it was fired. Lawrence was at the time in the passage, and, on the smoke subsiding, was seen to rush past the Count and proceed with great speed upstairs. He almost immediately returned, with a dirk in his hand, and plunged it up to the hilt into the Count's left shoulder; he continued his course and made for the street door, where stood the Countess, whom he instantly despatched by plunging the same dirk into her left breast. This last act had scarcely been completed when the Count appeared also at the door, bleeding, and following the assassin, who made for the house and ran upstairs. The Count, though extremely weak and faint, continued to follow him; but so great was the terror occasioned that no one else had the same resolution. The assassin and the Count had not been upstairs more than a minute when the report of another pistol was heard, which satisfied those below that Lawrence had finally put an end to the existence of his master. The alarm was now given, and the cry of 'Murder, murder!' resounded from every mouth. The Countess was still lying at the front door, by which the turnpike road runs, and at length men of sufficient resolution were found to venture upstairs, and, horrible to relate, they found the Count lying across his own bed, groaning heavily and nearly dead, and the bloodthirsty villain lying by his side a corpse. He had put a period to his own existence by placing a pistol that he found in the room in his mouth and discharging its contents

through his head. The Count only survived about twenty-five minutes after the fatal blow, and died without being able to utter a single word.

“The Countess had by this time been brought into the house; the wound was directly on her left breast, extremely large, and she died without uttering a single word. The servants of the house were all collected last night; but no cause for so horrid an act was at that time known; all was but conjecture.

“The following circumstance, in so extraordinary a case, may be, however worth while relating. The Count it appears, always kept a brace of pistols loaded in his bedroom, and a small dirk. About a month ago the Countess and the servants heard the report of a pistol upstairs, and were, in consequence, greatly alarmed; when one of the latter, a female, went upstairs and looked into her mistress’s room, it was full of smoke and she screamed out. On its clearing away, she saw Lawrence standing, who told her nothing was the matter: he had only fired one of his master’s pistols. It afterwards appeared that he had fired into the wainscot; it was loaded with ball, and the ball from the pistol is yet to be seen.

“The Count and Countess were about sixty years of age. The latter was highly accomplished, a great proficient in music, and greatly admired for her singing in fashionable parties. There is no reason whatever to believe that Lawrence was insane. Only about ten minutes previous to his committing this deed of blood, he went over to an adjoining public-house and took a glass of gin. He had lived only three months in the family, and, report says, was to be discharged in a few days.



"The Count and Countess had resided in Barnes for four or five years, and have left an only son, who, we understand, is at present in this country, studying the law.

"Besides his house on Barnes Terrace, Count d'Antraigues had a town establishment, No. 7 Queen Anne Street, W. He was fifty-six, and the Countess fifty-three years of age. The Count had eminently distinguished himself in the troubles which have convulsed Europe for the past twenty-two years. In 1789, he was actively engaged in favour of the Resolution, but during the tyranny of Robespierre he emigrated to Germany, and was employed in the service of Russia. At Venice, in 1797, he was arrested by Bernadotte, who pretended to have discovered in his portfolio all the particulars of the plot upon which the 18th Fructidor was founded. The Count made his escape from Milan, where he was confined, and was afterwards employed in the diplomatic mission of Russia at the Court of Dresden. In 1806 he was sent to England, with credentials from the Emperor of Russia, who had granted him a pension, and placed great dependence upon his services. He received here letters of denization, and was often employed by the Government. The Countess was the once celebrated Madame Saint-Huberty, an actress at the Théâtre-Français.<sup>1</sup> She had amassed a very large fortune by her professional talents."<sup>2</sup>

And the same impression of the *Times* contained this other account :

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<sup>1</sup> Madame Saint-Huberty had, of course, never appeared at the Théâtre-Français. Such is fame!

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, her savings only amounted to some 80,000 francs, the whole of which had been lost during the Revolution.

“The Count d’Antraigues, a very eminent political character, formerly a deputy of the nobility of Vivarais to the States-General, author of many eloquent tracts, who had married the celebrated singer and actress of the Royal Academy of Music at Paris, Madame Saint-Huberty, was murdered yesterday morning at seven o’clock, along with his lady, in their summer residence on Barnes Terrace, by one of their servants named Lorenzo, a Piedmontese, aged twenty-five years, who had been only a few months in their service, and whom they had no reason to suspect of such a diabolical design.

“Both the Count and Countess d’Antraigues were preparing to come to town, as they usually did every Wednesday. The Count had an appointment (as we understand) with his particular friend Mr. Canning, to meet him at ten o’clock, and had actually taken his papers in his hat and proceeded down the staircase from his bedroom, his lady, who went before, being at the door waiting, and calling for the servant to open the carriage. Lorenzo at that moment took from the bed of his master a pistol and a most superb Turkish poignard, which the Count d’Antraigues had brought with him from Constantinople. He discharged the pistol at his master, at six paces distance, on the staircase, and missed him, the ball passing between the Count and Countess.

“The murderer, seeing that the ball had not taken effect, took to the poignard, and stabbed his master in the shoulder. Though the blow was mortal, the Count had still strength to walk to his room. The servant then ran to the Countess, who was shrieking, and plunged, in the most audacious manner, the poignard into her breast. She fell, and died instantly, without any groans, saying only, ‘Lorenzo! Lorenzo!’

"It appears that the Count died, as soon as he re-entered his room, from an effusion of blood in his chest. The murderer, bewildered and frantic after his ferocious deed, came to the room where his master was lying, and, seizing on another of the four pistols which the Count kept constantly for his protection at his bedside, with the poignard, under the presentiment that one day or other his life would be attempted, discharged the contents into his mouth, and shattered his head in the most fearful manner. He died on the spot, and fell dead by the side of his master.<sup>1</sup>

"The alarm was given by the coachman, who was standing at the door, and the other servants. Two professional men came instantly, but no assistance could prevail. The house was besmeared with blood, and presented a most shocking spectacle, the three bodies being extended in such a small space. The coachman drove to town to fetch the doctor and the lawyer who was generally employed by the Count, and to convey the melancholy tidings to the house of the deceased in Queen Anne Street, W., where a great crowd of people were collected during the whole of the day. Dr. Chavernac of Gerrard Street, the surgeon, and Mr. Trickey, the solicitor, both the intimate friends of the deceased, went post-haste to Barnes Terrace. The papers, jewels, and other effects of the Count and Countess were put under seal in their presence, and in that of a magistrate and several respectable neighbours. A coroner's inquest is to take place this day at Barnes on the three bodies.

"No cause is yet known for the atrocious act which

<sup>1</sup> The *Times* of July 28, 1812, states that it had been ascertained that Lorenzo was an intimate friend of Sellis, who, after attempting to assassinate the Duke of Cumberland, committed suicide



has deprived of life two persons, who, by their talents, knowledge, amiable manners, and powerful connections, ranked very high in society. The Count was a man of colossal stature and imposing countenance, only fifty-eight years of age, and his lady fifty-two.

“Mr. Vansittart, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the particular friend of the Count, was informed of the lamentable event early yesterday, and Lord Sidmouth commissioned Mr. Brooks of the Alien Office to take, conjointly with the Count La Châtre, Commissary of his Majesty Louis XVIII., the proper measures to secure the papers and property of the deceased, who had been formerly Commissary of his Most Christian Majesty in Italy, and till his death an agent and correspondent of the Emperor of Russia.”

#### REPORT OF THE INQUEST.

(From the *Times*, July 24, 1812.)

“An inquest was held yesterday at the ‘White Hart,’ Barnes Terrace, before Charles Jemmett, Esq., Coroner for the County, after a view of the bodies of the Count and Countess d’Antraigues, and of Lawrence, who murdered them. ✓

“Susannah Black, the first witness, deposed that, on July 22nd inst., she was ordered by the Countess, about eight o’clock in the morning, to take some books, &c., to the carriage door; that she followed the Countess to the door, and saw Lawrence near the carriage with his face to the door, and ordered him to open the carriage door for his mistress, instead of which he walked into the house, and as he passed her mistress a pistol was fired, but she did not know who discharged it. She saw the Count on the stairs, and Lawrence going up the stairs.

Did not see anything in his hand. She afterwards saw Lawrence coming downstairs with a pistol in his right hand, and his left hand behind him, but could not see whether he had anything in it or not; that she ran into the garden alarmed; and that, on her return into the house by the hall, she went to the front door and saw her mistress lying on the ground, in the footpath of the street, near the carriage. She called for assistance, and another servant and the coachman, David Hebditch, came to her, and they took the Countess into the house. There was a great deal of blood about her, and she was alive, though speechless. Mr. Ball, a surgeon, was sent for, who attended immediately. But her mistress died in a few minutes after the same. Witness stated that one day, about three weeks ago, when the Count was absent, she was with the Countess in her bedroom, when they heard a loud report, and she ran downstairs, thinking it was a rap at the door. But finding no one there, she called 'Lawrence,' but no one answered. She then returned upstairs. The Countess met her at the door of the bedroom, and said it was the report of a pistol. Witness ran upstairs to the Count's room, and on coming to the door, she saw some smoke issue from it, and saw Lawrence in the room. She asked him what he was doing and he answered, 'Nothing.' She then went to her mistress, and told her Lawrence had fired off a pistol. The Countess went upstairs, and witness followed her, and heard her talk to Lawrence very coolly, but could not tell what she said, as she spoke French or Italian; but the Countess told her afterwards that he said he had been handling the pistol and it went off. When Lawrence came to the kitchen, she asked him how he dared to meddle with his master's pistols in his absence,

and he answered it went off by chance as he was handling it. She never knew of any quarrel or anger between the Count and Lawrence. Said Lawrence was a sober man, but latterly had been more passionate than before. Yesterday morning, the wind having blown the parlour door to with a great noise, the Count spoke rather sharply to Lawrence, thinking he banged it, and would wake his mistress. Lawrence had lived in the family about three months. Believed the dagger produced to be her master's, having many times seen it hanging in his room.

“Elizabeth Ashton, another servant of the Count and Countess, deposed that when the Countess came first downstairs, she was standing at the street door to wait on her mistress. The carriage was at the door. Her mistress passed her and went towards the carriage—the Count was coming downstairs. Witness heard the report of a pistol, was stunned by it, said she was a dead woman, turned round and said, ‘Lawrence ! Lawrence !’ When, looking up, she saw Lawrence coming downstairs, with a pistol in one hand, and a dagger in the other. She screamed out, and ran into the street, crying ‘Murder murder !’ went over to the public-house to give the alarm and, on her return, found her mistress lying on the foot-path of the street near the carriage, and, being so affected that she found she could not give any assistance, she went away.

“David Hebditch, coachman to the Count and Countess, deposed that he received orders from Lawrence to have the carriage ready yesterday morning, July 22, at five minutes before eight ; that he was at the door with the carriage before the clock struck eight ; that, as soon as he arrived there, Lawrence came to the



coach, opened the door, and put into the carriage a tin can filled with oil ; that he then went into the house, and soon afterwards returned ; that when the Countess came down and was proceeding to the carriage, Lawrence went into the house, and soon after he passed his mistress, the report of a pistol was heard ; that the Countess asked him, the coachman, what was the matter, and he answered it was from the inside of the house, that in a few minutes afterwards, as he was sitting on his box before the door, he saw Lawrence come downstairs, and, with a sharp instrument he held in his hand, which the witness believed to be a dagger, strike it into the shoulder of the Count—he saw the dagger under his shoulder ; that Lawrence then passed the Count and proceeded towards the street-door ; that he, the coachman got off the box as quickly as he could, and, as he was going towards his master, the Countess passed him, going towards the carriage, and, on turning round, to follow her, he saw her staggering, and she fell, exclaiming : ‘ It was Lawrence ! it was Lawrence ! ’ He saw blood about her, and some on the ground, but could not tell exactly what part it came from. Did not see Lawrence afterwards, but in about three minutes more heard report of another pistol, which appeared to come from upstairs. Soon after the Count came to the door, and blood ran out of his sleeve. Left him there, and went to assist the Countess into the house. On surgeon coming and desiring her to be stripped, went out of the room to look after his master, and found him sitting on the bed in his own room, in a reclining posture, with his feet on floor. Was then alive, but speechless. At the same time, saw Lawrence, with his face lying on the floor, apparently dead, with some blood near his mouth. Mr.

King, a surgeon, then came and desired the Count might be stripped. Witness assisted to do so, and held him while they got a sponge and some water, and washed the wound. After that he went away and drove carriage to town. Believed Lawrence was sober. He spoke very correct to him, the coachman, when he gave him his order, and did not appear at all mentally deranged.

“William Hitchin, master of the ‘Sun’ public-house, at Barnes, deposed that yesterday morning, about eight o’clock, coming along the street, he saw Lawrence put a tin can into the Count’s carriage, and return into the house. When he got opposite the door, he heard the report of a pistol. Turned immediately round, and saw the Count and Countess just within the door. The Countess said something to the coachman, who answered, ‘It is indoors, my lady.’ The Count and lady returned into the house. He then heard some persons screaming, and was going to get some weapon, but coachman begged him not to go, and he did not. The coachman and he were going into the house, when the Countess came out of the house, passed them and fell down. Thought she had only fainted, and, while standing by her, saw the Count come out of the house, with blood streaming from his shoulder. The Count instantly returned into the house, and immediately afterwards witness heard the report of a pistol in one of the upper rooms; this report occurred before the Count could possibly get to his own room. Some people came up, and he accompanied them into the house. The first thing he saw on the floor of the passage was a dagger, bloody and with some silk on it, as if it came from a shawl; on desiring a person to go upstairs with him, he refused without having a weapon, on which witness

gave him the dagger, and himself took a poker. The coachman followed, and the witness desired him to go first into the room, which he did. On entering the room, he saw the Count sitting on a bed, alive, but speechless, and Lawrence lying on the floor dead, with a brass double-barrelled pistol close to him.

“Matthew Ball, Surgeon, of Barnes, deposed that, about a quarter past eight o’clock in the morning, a woman came to his house, and desired him to come immediately to Count d’Antraigues, for the Count and Countess were both murdered; immediately went, and when he came into the house, saw the Countess lying on the floor of the parlour, and a great deal of blood both on the floor and on her clothes. Then examined and found a large lacerated wound on her right breast, made by a sharp instrument, which had passed through the third and fourth ribs to the cavity of the chest, from which a great effusion of blood had proceeded. As soon as he found the wound was mortal, and that she could not live many minutes, witness went up to the Count, to assist Mr. King, a surgeon, who had previously gone up to dress his wound, and found the Count had received a wound on the shoulder from a sharp instrument, which had penetrated four inches. He was motionless and speechless, and died in about a quarter of an hour after his (Mr. B.) seeing him. Saw two small leaden bullets in the string-board of the stairs, which appeared to have been shot from a pistol. When he entered the Count’s room, saw Lawrence lying on the floor on his belly, with a quantity of blood under his face; on examination, found a loaded pistol had been discharged into his mouth, the contents of which had very much lacerated and torn his mouth, and from which wound he had instantly



died, the bullet being still lodged in the vertebra of the neck.

"The Coroner then told the jury that, as they had not only heard what the witnesses had sworn, but also the depositions read over to them, it was unnecessary for him to go into a recapitulation thereon. He should, therefore, leave them to determine whether, from the evidence they had heard, they believed, first that Lawrence had murdered the Count and Countess; and, secondly, whether he had committed suicide, being in his senses.

"In about five minutes, the jury returned a verdict that Lawrence had murdered the Count and Countess, and had afterwards committed suicide, being in his senses."

"Thus perished," says M. Adolphe Jullien, "the greatest lyric *tragédienne* whom France has possessed. But she did not wholly die: the recollection of her remains graven in the mind of her admirers, and she left behind her a luminous trace of her passage across the stage of the Opera. Her generous influence continued to make itself felt throughout long years; her triumphs excited many ambitions, inflamed many resolutions. She remained an object of admiration and emulation for all the artistes, for those who had seen her, as for those who, in later times, knew her only by renown. She united, in fact, in the highest degree, two qualities usually disconnected: the rarest talent of the singer and the greatest art of the *tragédienne*. She was in every sense of the word an artiste of genius."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *L' Opéra secret au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : Madame Saint-Huberty.*



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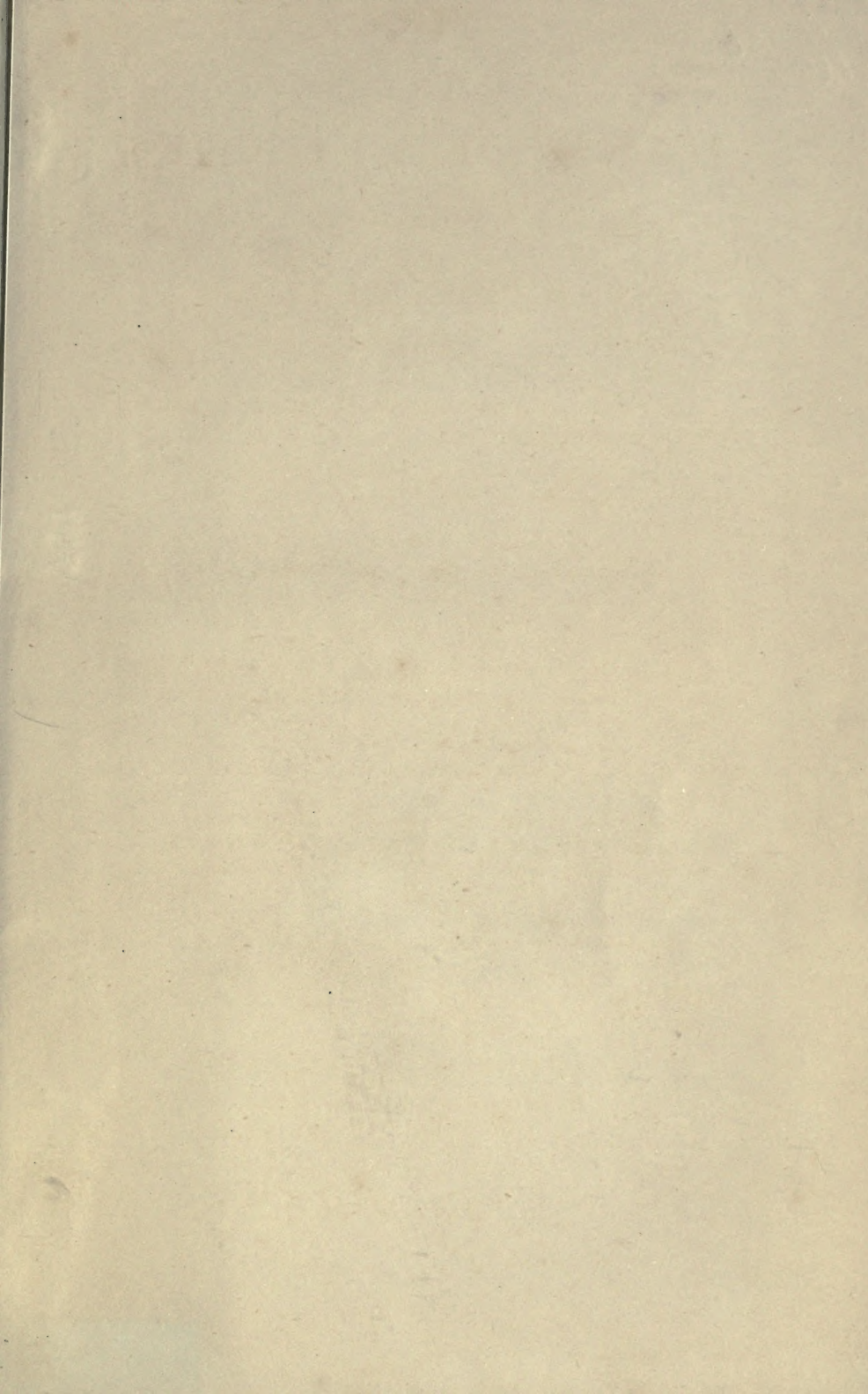
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